

Dark Horizons



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Autumn 2002

edited by

Debbie Bennett

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Dark Horizons

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Dark Horizons

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Editorial

Debbie Bennett

Some more typos from last issue – apologies to author Nina Allan, whose name I mis-spelled as Allen. There's another story from Nina this issue, but I've got it right this time!

No poetry this issue, because nobody has sent any! Don't worry – poetry is edited by award-winning poet Joel Lane, not by me, whose knowledge of poetry would fit on a small postage stamp. So feel free to send it in. Plus I'll take your stories and art and even your free adverts for genre bits and pieces – provided you're a BFS member or support us in some way and are either non-profit making or small press.

Congratulations to Alison Davies, whose stories you may have spotted in recent issues of Dark Horizons. Her first collection of short stories *Small Deaths* is due to be published by Sarob Press in January 2003, with an introduction by Graham Joyce.

Artwork this issue (in order of appearance) is by Lara Bandilla, Sarah Zama, Alfred Klosterman and Steve Lines. Next time, I hope to move to a full colour cover, so I'm on the lookout for a nice piece if anyone has any ideas.

I hope you enjoy this issue's offerings. If you do – then write and let me know. I'm happy to print your letters. What stories would you like more of? Horror? Fantasy? I can't promise anything as I can only print what I get sent, but it would be interesting to know. The next Dark Horizons should be out in the spring, assuming I have enough contributions to fill it.

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The Boardwalk Cats

Ken Goldman

(1) Grimalkin : The Witch's Familiar

Not always is there truth to the stories the shore elders tell of Jersey legend and lore. The old men sit in the pavilions that dot the famous boardwalks, each one swearing his story is gospel, and most who listen nod their heads politely and smile while not believing a word. In any case, as the elders tell it . . .

Many years ago an old woman took in a stray black cat, a seemingly ordinary creature of indeterminate age whose only needs were shelter and food. The woman called her new pet Grimalkin and before long the feline became her familiar, an especial favourite among the old woman's tabbies and privy to her darkest secrets. At her mistress' feet the cat learned the ancient black arts. The precise nature of the feline's mysterious abilities have been lost during these many years of her story's telling, and it is possible she knew magic long before being taken in. Those who encountered her swear Grimalkin was a creature unlike any other. Her powers were neither good nor evil. They simply were.

One never truly possesses a cat, although one may easily be possessed by one. Some say the woman grew jealous when the cat's abilities surpassed her own, and she banished the feline from her sight. Others claim Grimalkin had learned all she could from the crone, and growing bored set out on her own. To this day no one can say from precisely where she came nor how far she travelled. But arriving at the Jersey shoreline she selected as her new domicile a small crawlspace beneath the famous boardwalk back when the city by the sea was still in its glorious infancy.

There it was Grimalkin delivered her first litter . . .

Please do not feed the boardwalk cats!

Their health and safety are maintained by the municipality of Atlantic City and their population is controlled through non lethal means by C.A.T., the Cat Assistance Team of South Jersey.

*(Sign located near Sovereign Avenue and
The Boardwalk, Atlantic City, New Jersey)*

(2) Scout : The Blackest Cat

Beneath the promenade, the cats slept in multicoloured clusters, undulating mounds of soft fur. Even in great numbers their accumulated breaths amounted to little more than a series of gentle exhalations, quick whooshes of air capable only

of ruffling whiskers and easily nullified by the cool morning breezes coming off the Atlantic.

The blackest was already awake, had been for some time. Pushing himself from his female he did not rouse Tam nor any of her little ones, stretching upon his feet until one bone in his hind leg lightly cracked like a snapped twig. He was not old, although life had not been entirely kind and he no longer felt young.

Scout strolled into the sunshine that washed the beach, always the first to venture from his crevice although it was already late morning. His sleek fur proved advantageous when darkness fell and he nestled with his mate amid the shadows. Exposed in the daylight upon the ivory sand, however, he took more precautions while foraging, and if an occasional stranger kneeled to stroke him he had learned to quietly keep moving, his tail curled to the sky showing he could not be bothered.

The beach had not yet filled with the many human visitors who found enjoyment reposing in the sun. Even the best scavenger would discover no food during this time of day, except maybe for a few crumbs inside some of the numerous receptacles along the sand. But there would be prospects. A good hunter could determine where they were and lead the others to his findings. Scout was a good hunter.

He needed to be, for today there were many mouths to feed. Tam recently had dropped another litter and there were more young ones than the last time. All were healthy, of course. Tam was a strong female and wise enough to keep herself hidden from the prying eyes of Man. But her young were hungry and the daily morsels of chewy gruel left for them were not enough. Scout headed toward the surf catwalking past a young human male and his female. Because his animal senses detected no food here the two held little interest for him. Soon the sand would become very hot and uncomfortable, burning the pads of his feet. It was much better to keep moving before one of them noticed him and wasted his time.

Nearer the surf the sand felt cooler. Scout relished the sensation, aware it might not last long. Often someone would chase him when he wandered this close to the water. Sometimes it would be a child who decided the beach was not big enough for both of them. More often an adult did the chasing. Strange creatures these were, unnecessary at best and bothersome at worst, that left tidbits for you one moment, then later threatened you for trying to eat. Half the time they shooed you off only to call you to them moments later. Long ago Scout might have followed one of them hoping for the warmth of a shelter and the possibility of easy nourishment. Now it seemed best to avoid them.

A dead seagull lay in the sand. Water soaked, it must have recently washed to shore because it showed no signs of having been picked at by any of the beach's many marauders. Scout sniffed the remains, quickly determining there was nothing here for him. But he noticed the bird had caught some sort of shelled sea creature, a fairly large one that had not escaped the clench of the gull's beak even

after the captor had died. Perhaps the bird drowned before completing its kill, or maybe the creature plummeted in mid-flight, its life simply having run out. Scout did not care. Only one thing concerned the cat. Here was food.

He tugged at one of the large claws of the crab-thing, managing to free the gull's final meal from its long beak. He allowed himself the pride befitting a feline, for on this morning his mate's young ones would eat well. Scout strode along the sand with his trophy held fast between his teeth.

Dignity proved short lived. One sharp claw of the crab-thing struck out, clamping down upon the cat's nose with a terrible ferocity. The sea creature was not dead, and it did not relish a second capture. Scout shrieked his injury, rolling on his back to slap at it with his paws, struggling to release its hold. But the crab-thing tightened its clamp until thick bubbles of blood dripped from the cat's burning wound. He slapped the creature into the hardened sand near the surf. Finally it released its grasp and crawled off with the first onrush of the ocean, leaving Scout whining in terse stop/start at the water's edge. He dipped his nose into a small puddle of salt water but this caused it to sting even more.

If he could bring that crab-thing back to shore . . .

If he could have one more chance to do this over, to prepare himself another time for the snapping claw . . .

Scout stared at the heaving waves of the surf, his eyes taking on a incandescent glow that seemed to catch the reflection of the sun. He gave his brain a little push because he was not with the others now and he had to rely on his own ability to do this. Setting a crimson bead on the rolling surf he did not stop gaping at the single spot. With a precision that only a cat can manage he remained for many moments without shifting his head, a feline sculpture of black marble imposed upon the white sand.

[Here . . . to me . . . Here . . . Here . . .]

From the ocean the dripping crab-thing returned. It crawled in a direct path as it made its way to the dry sand and toward the cat. The sea creature stopped just short of Scout's paw and remained there motionless.

The cat hissed at the thing, raised his paw and brought it down with a snap. His claws clicked on the thick shell. He did this again, then again, bouncing the creature before finally managing to puncture it. The crab thing burst open like a festering wound spilling salt water and goo.

Scout stole a furtive glance behind him. The beach had become more crowded and it would not be good if any of the languishing humans noticed what he had done. He had been especially careful never to use his special ability on anything that stood upon two legs, even if it would have meant more food for himself and the others. A little push from each of the cats working together might succeed in getting some of the men to leave larger portions for them each morning, although it would have been risky to try. The ability was useful against four legged intruders, but no cat practised this power where any man could see. Using his skill upon a small sea creature was different, and Scout's pain had

caused him to go claw to claw without thinking. This was not foolishness, of course. A cat was incapable of that, although he studied the beach to see if any eyes watched him.

[No . . . nothing . . . nothing to fear . . .]

Scout nudged the crab-thing to assure himself that this time it was dead. Feeling it safe to reclaim his catch he made his way across the beach back to Tam and her young. He moved more quickly as he approached the promenade because of the sand's heat. Finally he darted in a full run to the boardwalk, the dripping shell creature's two claws dangling from his teeth like odd mandibles.

The other families of cats surrounding him were mostly awake, small dark denizens meandering about in the shadows of the boardwalk. Golden Tam was with the little ones in the cool shade beneath the thumping of the footsteps just above. The kittens' small mouths opened as they sniffed what treat Scout had brought. The spotted one, Tin-Tin, struggled to his feet but wobbled and fell back down, standing on all fours a skill he had not quite mastered. Scout dropped the crab-thing alongside his mate, bit off a small portion of the meat inside for himself, and stepping back enjoyed watching Tam and her little ones feed.

A sharp hissing sound from behind distracted him. He turned to see the large orange striped cat who had wandered under the boardwalk one rainy afternoon not long ago. Cuff was not among those who had slept there since birth, and he wore a strange object around his neck suggesting he once had made his home among the same creatures who filled the beaches. Although he scavenged little food for himself the other boardwalk cats had not chased Cuff off, but he never seemed one of them. Scout had often watched the large tomcat sniff around Tam, and he did not like him. Now he felt the fur on his back bristle, and he hissed at the interloper to demonstrate that if Cuff desired food from the sea he would find none here.

Scout targeted his gaze as he had done with the shell creature. Should the intruder require a little push he could see to it. His eyes glowed like fiery stones, and the large orange cat twitched, struggling to release himself from some annoying muddleheaded funk.

[Leave . . . Not one of us . . . Not welcome here . . . Leave . . .]

Cuff backed off still hissing. When the animal had withdrawn a satisfactory distance Scout resumed his attention to his female and her brood. The entire incident passed unnoticed by them, each too busily tearing apart what remained of the crab-thing. Scout stepped forward to join in the feeding and quickly forgot the brief episode with his adversary.

(3) Orange Striped Cuff

'I'm sorry to have to do this to you, pal. But there's a new baby in the family now, and you haven't exactly been sociable toward her.'

Jim slipped the 'My Name is STRIPE' identification tag from the cat's thick

neck but kept the collar intact. 'Something to remember us by, okay?' he said, and swung the car door open. He knew the large tabby was too matured and ornery to be adoption material at the animal shelter. Three weeks there and it would be the big sleep for him.

At least on his own the animal had a fighting chance.

It looked like rain and Jim knew he could have picked a better day to give his older daughter's pet his walking papers. But, like the saying went, if it were to be done it was best it were done quickly.

'So long, pal. You're a tough old bastard. You'll make it okay.'

Jim did it quickly.

[. . . Not one of us . . . Not welcome here . . .]

Cuff had got the sable cat's message, all right. He had been down this road before. Pacing the boardwalk, he settled near the pavilion where the old folks sat, his bushy tail slapping furiously at the wooden planks, his anger giving him strength. With strength came boldness.

A small girl approached holding a hamburger dripping catsup. She called to Cuff, and he recognised the sing-song 'Here kitty kitty!' Her words echoed those of another little girl he remembered, and he had learned to hate the expression. But picking up the scent of savoury meat he turned to her. His first instinct was to scratch and run, but sniffing the beef he reconsidered. Glowing like agate marbles his eyes caught hers, and the child held the entire burger out for him. Too late a woman came running toward him muttering angrily. Cuff swallowed the last of the ground beef as the woman pulled the girl away.

His hunger satisfied, he turned his attention to a small figure on the sand . . .

. . . where another child is building a lumpy castle. Noticing the large cat near the railing the boy stops what he is doing and gets to his feet, seeming to examine what he sees. He bee-lines determinedly to the water's edge and wades out into the surf where a huge breaker promptly turns him upside down. A blonde lifeguard manages to pull the boy to shore where his frantic mother waits. Once it seems he is okay, the woman promptly tears her kid a new ass hole.

The striped cat watched from the promenade, newly aware of cause and effect. Cuff had picked up an amusing talent from his feline companions, and from a safe distance had played with the child on the beach as a lesser cat might toy with a rubber mouse. Curious to determine what he had learned from the others with whom he had made his new home, he now had his answer.

[. . . go to the water . . . go to the water . . .]

With only a little push the boy had done just that.

Cuff had not felt this good in a long time, for getting his own way had proven much easier than he had imagined. He could not remember having experienced such a strange sensation of . . .

... of what?

He had almost forgotten the notion of power and dominance, of getting whatever he wanted by the sheer force of his determination, but the memory returned to him now. He thought of his ebony rival whose back always rose at the sight of him.

[Not welcome here . . . Not one of us . . .]

The black cat probably was off looking for food, and beneath the boardwalk Tam and her young nestled alone sheltered in darkness.

Tam . . . Alone . . .

[‘ . . . herekittycatthekittycatthekittycat . . . ’]

Cuff held that thought, his pace quickening. By the time he reached the beach he was running.

(4) Spotted Tin-Tin And Golden Tam

In her concealed furrow Tam felt hungry and disturbed. Her most recent litter had excellent appetites, but the few dishes of soggy pellets each morning would not do for her family's growing numbers. The gutted shelled creature lay before her, and still her brood cried for more. Scout and some others had returned to the beach to search for additional food, but Tam felt doubtful they would bring back very much. Some of the others' smaller ones had already starved, and with new litters the danger was much worse. The amount of provisions brought by the men had not changed although there were new mouths. Like many females, Tam had nested in a secret niche of the boardwalk piling where no man could detect her or her young. Such security had its drawbacks.

[Find food . . . find now . . .]

At first the thought seemed her own and Tam shook it off, for she would not leave her small ones unprotected. She noticed the spotted kitten was awake, and although unsteady, Tin-Tin finally had made it to his feet.

Two tiny moonstones glowed in the kitten's eyes.

[Food . . . now . . .]

She tried a weak push of her own to serve as discipline. Tam's maternal concerns would allow no more.

[No, little one . . . Go to sleep . . .]

Another push, more insistent.

[Hungry now . . . food now . . .]

Tin-Tin's ability to get his way proved remarkable. Tam found herself in the open sunlight hoping to locate something near the boardwalk food stands. She did not have much time because her feline instincts told her rain was coming. Pickings turned slim when it stormed, for cats and water did not mix well. Mistrusting anything on two legs, Tam darted among the trash cans terrified should any person move toward her. She was not an unfriendly animal, but unacquainted with Man's ways she kept her distance.

A young man caught her attention. He was uttering some high pitched gibberish meant to entice her and holding out something for her. She could smell what it was, and she wanted it.

Tam stepped forward tentatively.

He was offering food.

In the pavilion sits Abraham Ringwold with his teenaged grandson. 'Storm's coming, Dennis. Bad one.' Having lived in the shore town his entire life Abe knows about these things.

The kid looks to the horizon without taking his pizza from his mouth. 'What're you talkin' about, Gram'pa? There's not a cloud in the sky. Nothing in the forecast says—'

'Screw Willard Scott. Storm's coming, I tell you. See that yella cat rushing about like someone stole her tail? Cat running 'round means change in the weather's on its way. Learned that from an old sailor when I was a kid out fishin' for flounder in Barnegat Bay. Same old salt who used to tell me stories about Grimalkin. He knew all about them witchin' cats.'

The kid hides his grin, but he watches the gold cat dart from one trash bin to the next.

'She's just scavenging for food, is all, Gram'pa. There's no forecast of rain this whole week. It'd be cool if you were right, though. Shitty weather means some extreme surfing.'

'Then you'd best be waxing your board, boy. Storm's approaching, sure as shinola. Just ask that tabby. 'Course, she's more likely to come if you don't pay no special 'tention to her. Those animals hate eye contact, you know. 'Specially if she's one of them boardwalk cats avoids people altogether.'

'Do you know as much about cats as you do about the weather, Gram'pa?' This time the kid's grin is out there. Regarding the boardwalk felines Dennis has heard every story from Abe ten times over. He holds out his pizza slice for the yellow cat. 'Here, puss-puss. A little pepperoni, puddy-tat? Are you really a witch or just a plain old pussy?'

The cat moves tentatively towards him, then bolts down the stairway and under the boards.

'She's a boardwalk cat, all right,' Abe says. 'And I'd be careful 'bout getting any of that brood too spooked, boy. No telling what them mangy bitch kitties can do.'

'Maybe she'll turn me into a frog, huh?' The kid is smiling like some gap toothed Cheshire Cat, but his elder doesn't see the humour.

'You cockshit whiz kids know ever'thing, don't you?'

Dennis knows every chord to 'Smells Like Teen Spirit.' He can roll one bomber of a joint in ten seconds flat. But he knows squat about the true story of the cats that live under the boardwalk. Of course, any fool visiting this stretch of beach can see the felines are real enough, even if they aren't the furry freaks of

nature old Abe believes. But their story is easy to check out if a guy has the balls to goose the little fuckers out of their holes.

Dennis swallows the last of his pizza, his smile gone to full tilt. He has the balls.

(5) The Boardwalk Cats

Night differed little from day beneath the boardwalk, but by mid-afternoon dark clouds and thunder grumbles made it difficult to tell the difference everywhere else. Already a sweeping wind had kicked up and the ocean danced with whitecaps. Light rain was falling and the sky turned charcoal, a guarantee conditions would worsen.

The beach emptied early. Scout had uncovered scraps of food inside discarded lunch bags here and there, but nothing worth carrying back.

Although his nose throbbed he was fortunate to have discovered the shelled sea creature before the storm hit. Pinpricks of drizzle pockmarked the sand while he headed back to Tam, rolls of thunder hurrying him as he slithered underneath the boards.

The familiar angry hiss stopped him cold. Scout hissed back at eyes that pierced the darkness, watching his mate shivering with fear even while her litter slept peacefully by her side. He noticed the orange striped cat had positioned himself proudly before Tam.

Cuff's eyes burned with fire.

Dennis is very careful to avoid the steady rain. Night has fallen and it is unlikely anyone has paid much notice to a kid slipping under the boardwalk. There are enough transients who do the same just to take a quick piss, but the kid has his own reasons for being here and for keeping the contents of his knapsack dry. To be on the safe side he has pulled his slicker over the sack. A guy can't be too careful when he's planning to raise a little hell.

Not many people are out except for a few old farts in the pavilions. Below the promenade the cats seem present and accounted for because those fuckers hate the rain. Dennis expects the felines probably hate lightning and thunder even more. In fact, he is counting on it.

He isn't certain how many grams of explosive materials the cherry bombs, quarter sticks, and block busters contain. Not enough to cause any real damage excepting a few shattered nerves, of course, but he feels positive that whatever crackers he is carrying are illegal in most states.

It's Independence Day all over again, kitty cats.'

He sets a few sticks of Crackling Jack's ground spinners under the pilings just for a little dazzle, and connects them to a long fuse. Moving down several yards he sets another stack, and another, enough to liberate every boardwalk pussy from her hiding place.

Tonight Dennis feels like the cat who is about to swallow a whole flock of canaries.

One feline slept apart from the others in a secret crawlspace. She was the oldest of them, and excepting some grey around her muzzle she was as black as Scout. Most nights she slept soundly, and even through severe thunder storms she had no difficulty remaining asleep. But the feline had a keen sense for when something was amiss, and tonight she sprang awake sensing danger.

All cats understand the nature of evil, but an old cat has a kinship with it. Crawling on her belly the aged female watched the two legged intruder who had ventured deep under the boardwalk. The shadowy figure skulked around the pilings, stopping occasionally at the foundations to drop something that serpentine about several of the walkway's underpinnings. Seeing the spark of a small flashfire of light she knew he was up to no good. Instinct told the old feline she had no choice but to act.

Destiny had selected this moment to make her appearance known.

'Huh? What the—?'

Dennis is not easily spooked by the small lumpy shadows surrounding him, but he almost fudges his BVDs when something touches his leg. Only a large black cat stands there. He is glad no one is around to have seen him respond like such an asshole.

'Beat it, or you're kitty litter!'

The old cat doesn't budge.

'Okay. Your funeral.'

He lights the long fuse and climbs over the dune into the storming night without the grin leaving his face. He has given himself plenty of time, and from the water's edge he can watch the fun.

On the beach there is enough thunder to fill the world. Dennis turns to notice the old ebony cat climbing the tall dune while looking to the clouds. She studies them as if making a selection, fixing her attention on the darkest. Her eyes catch the brilliance of the lightning. Dennis sees the orbs glow even from the water's edge, hears the heavens respond with thunder.

His grin disappears.

The sky splinters, a twisting bolt of white hot energy targeting the spot where he stands. Touching down with a snap it is the last thing Dennis sees. In the ivory brilliance he does a mad electrified dance like an over-wound toy and crumples in the sand.

His blackened flesh smoulders even in the pouring rain.

Scout waited until the orange cat slept. If he could not successfully budge Cuff from Tam as he had done before, he would use more traditional means of combat.



He crouched upon his belly and advanced toward the slumbering cat, his intent diverted when the bolt of lightning struck the beach.

Cuff awakened to discover Scout standing near. Other cats stirred and many were trembling, but Cuff was the first to react. Among all of them he hated storms the most, for it was before a terrible thunder storm the slamming of a car door effectively ended the only good part of his life. Not very much frightened him, but thunder and lightning did. He sprinted in panic flight past Scout to put distance between himself and further peril, reaching the pile of quarter sticks a moment before the sizzling fuse. Cuff's attention shifted to the advancing flame and he backed against the tall stack of Dennis' 500-gram heavy weight crackers. Searing heat fried his ass but Cuff had no time to respond. The first explosion tore the striped cat into three blood soaked scraps that resembled a shredded wind sock blown from a cannon.

Sparklers and snapping crackers sent screeching cats scurrying to the beach in thick waves. In multitudes they scattered through sheets of rain until the sand turned black with them.

At the water's edge stood a woman adorned in flowing black robes, the sheer material floating as if part of the wind itself. With wispy ringlets of soaking white hair spilling over her face and bare arms stretched to the sky, she was a misty seductress in strobing pantomime. She turned in a slow and unvarying ballet that seemed vaguely sexual, bare feet hovering inches above the sand. Thick bolts of lightning revealed the toothless smile of a hag.

She had seen her cats were hungry, that if she were to act it must be quickly. She had been expecting a sign, something – *anything* – that would reveal her time had come. Tonight she had received that sign.

'Come! Come!' she chanted to the expanding orbit of felines. 'Fate selects this night for us! So much to be done, little ones! So very much!'

Exploding like tiny minefields beneath the boardwalk, the fire crackers and sparklers have gotten a rise out of Abraham Ringwold.

'Fool kids,' the old man mutters to himself, shaking his white crowned head with disgust. Tonight he sits alone inside the covered pavilion, dry enough but still shaking in the cold wind. His daughter is off drinking herself stupid in some trashy boardwalk bar. And Dennis is God knows where.

The sand dune has blocked a clear view, but Abe sees the scores of cats flee to the open beach. There's a woman down there too who was not there a moment earlier, and now those cats are gathering around like she's telling them some bedtime story. Abe has always known these felines were bewitched. He has seen their little tricks when no one else noticed, subtle bullshit things no one would look at twice unless he was really watching them bastards close. But go try and make others understand. The world is filled with cockshit whiz kids who know better than a crazy old coot with too much time on his hands.

Of course even a buzzard like himself usually had enough sense to get out of

the rain, maybe get himself inside a casino and make Donald Trump richer before the arthritis flared up really bad, then call it a night.

Abe wants to do just that, but those bastard cats won't leave his thoughts. The old woman by the water's edge is still calling those fur balls together as if they're her own children, for Chrissake. And they're coming to her, too, by the hundreds, it seems. Where are the damned cops when you're looking for them? By morning that beach will look like a litter box.

An old man's mind is a wondrous thing. It can't remember what was on the dinner plate three hours ago, but uncluttered with the detritus of life's bullshit it can put together extraordinary thoughts that greater minds would consider nonsense.

For many years Abe has pondered the story about the old witch. Watching the cats his breakthrough moment comes just as clear as day . . .

A woman alone isn't capable of birthing many children in a lifetime. Five, maybe six if she pushes it. But a female cat? Hell, a cat can birth maybe dozens, and those suckers can have dozens more of their own, until you have what is crawling down there on the beach right now. And . . .

. . . Witches are smart, just as smart as the devil, you might say. And cats and witches, they just go together like . . .

. . . like maybe lightning and thunder?

A dim memory stirs.

[When shall we meet again, in thunder, lightning or, rain . . . ?]

[Yes! From 'Macbeth,' when I was a kid! 'Bubble bubble toil and trouble . . . or maybe it was 'Double, double . . .'? Christ, I'm gettin' old . . .]

Back then people believed cats and witches were one and the same, that a witch could turn herself into a cat and vice versa. Well, maybe there was a good reason for that.

Maybe there was one damned good reason.

[. . . and maybe I'm lookin' at it right now!]

A clap of thunder makes the old man flinch. On the boardwalk the lamps wink out. Some lights near the pavilion hiss and explode. Abe has to cover his head against the spray of sparks.

'Shit!' he says aloud to no one. 'Damned power failure will bring the muggers out for sure!'

'We are the children of the night,
Gentle are we – yet feel our might.
Singing, dancing, chanting low.
Power building . . . let it go!
We are the spokes of the mighty wheel,
This power we raise that all might feel!"

On the beach the old woman sang while every cat's head turned toward the

darkened resort town. Even the smallest kittens studied the length of the boardwalk as if a signal had passed among them, each cat riveting attention upon a selected spot and holding his stare. The hordes of boardwalk cats acted in unison, a compelling collaboration of feline minds together sensing strength in their numbers.

The woman raised her arms like the conductor of a symphony orchestra gathered in the sky. She waved at the black clouds, fingers caressing the wind while her robes flapped behind her like bats' wings.

Grimalkin was back. The old witch had never really been gone.

'The time has come, little ones!'

A roll of thunder . . . a wink of lightning . . .

'His own kingdom! His own kingdom by the sea! And with the proper minions to serve him!'

A legion of moonstone eyes turned skyward glowing in the darkness.

A little push from each, just a little push . . .

The lightning touched down once, twice, a hundred times and more. It struck the casinos and the piers, and the high rise hotels, each falling dark as if a great switch had been thrown. From the boardwalk came screams, and all through the downpour more shrieks pierced the night. Seen from the beach the shadowy promenade resembled a grotesque puppet show. With each lightning bolt more figures fell.

In the winking luminescence the old witch led her feline progeny back to their nests. Scout, Tam, and her little ones remained close by the woman's side. This night they would spend nestled in Grimalkin's arms, no longer hungry nor afraid.

Beneath the boardwalk, a thousand demons slept soundly.

Tomorrow would bring a new day.

Inside the pavilion a befuddled cat the colour of snow awakens from a deep sleep. Stretching his legs he has only a vague sense of where he is, but he feels uncertain of much else. He looks at the boardwalk as if seeing it for the first time, although something inside tells him he knows this place.

It is coming on morning. The rain has stopped and there is even the remnant of a full moon illuminating the purple sky. For some reason this comforts him. The ivory cat is surprised at the ease of his movement as he walks out upon the boards that are still slick with rain. He has a dim memory of aching joints, but now he feels no pain at all.

Curiously, he senses his every movement has a supple grace that feels almost feminine.

And something else, something that comes as only a pale realisation almost not worth noting.

There is not a single human being in sight anywhere along the boardwalk.

There are, however, an awful lot of cats.

Mirror Of Ages

Andrew Fell

Julie was beginning to lose her patience. Sighing, she pulled into a field entrance to turn the car round.

Steve twisted the map to read it upside down. 'That had to be the road.'

'So why isn't there a sign?'

'Don't know. Perhaps Miss Rondey doesn't get much passing trade, and just relies on the entry in the book.'

'Miss Rondey?'

Steve waved the bed and breakfast guide at her, then read out loud: 'Miss Rondey has been welcoming guests to her rural cottage for over forty years.'

'It would still have been nice to be given a few clues how to get there.'

'I just hope she's taking in guests.'

Julie laughed. 'Well I don't suppose she's full. It's only through desperation that we're here.'

She pulled onto a grass-lined track. Brambles reached out into their path, whipping the windscreen. A soft moon, made dirty with the remnants of the day's haze, illuminated the trees on either side of the road. Some were leafless, their twisted limbs standing in defiance of the summer.

Further down the track Julie could see a large house. On both sides of the drive, grass grew uncontrolled on what had been lawns. Two rows of flowers – incongruous amongst the untamed greenery – reached upwards like drowning men about to sink below the waves.

Julie stopped on the gravel drive. Through a window she could see someone standing in front of what looked like a large mirror. The woman looked round. Feeling guilty for intruding on her privacy, Julie walked over to the porch and waited.

Nothing.

'Aren't you going to knock?' Steve asked as he pulled a bag out of the car.

'No, I mean, someone's seen me.'

Her hand reached towards a brass knocker, but she waited a little longer for signs of movement through the frosted window. 'What if she isn't taking in guests?'

'Then she can come to the door and tell us. I'm not in the mood for playing games.' Steve marched across the gravel. His hand lunged towards the knocker.

The door suddenly pulled inwards as though fearful of being touched. Inside stood a woman in her early thirties with unkempt hair falling unevenly about her shoulders. She looked straight at Julie. Her eyes seemed to suggest recognition, but Julie had never seen her before, and looked away awkwardly.

'We're after a room for the night,' Julie said.

The landlady frowned and stepped back into the gloomy passageway. 'It's very late.'

'You have vacancies though, don't you?' Steve asked. 'We've been driving around for hours.'

The landlady nodded. 'Of course.' She gestured for them to follow her down the hallway.

Julie noticed the visitors' book lying on a table by the stairs. Embossed on the leather binding were the words *Welcome to Fortly House*.

'Please, go ahead,' the landlady said.

Julie opened the book to sign her name, taking a moment to study the last entries.

'This way.' The landlady turned onto the stairs, clutching the banister. At the top she paused to look up the corridor before proceeding. Then she pushed a door inwards, allowing Steve and Julie to enter.

Julie scanned the interior and nodded.

'I'll leave you to it, then.' The landlady turned towards the stairs.

Julie closed the door. 'I don't like this place,' she whispered.

'Why?'

'I'm not sure. She's... odd.'

Steve dropped a travel bag onto the bed. 'God, I'm tired.'

'You're not bothered?'

'About what? So the garden's seen better days and the landlady's a bit strange.'

'Exactly,' Julie replied. 'The *landlady*. Where's Miss Rondey – she'd have to be in her sixties at least.'

'So it's probably her daughter. Quite frankly, I'd have been happy for a toddler to open the door so long as they had a room.'

'Did you see the visitors' book? The last entry was nearly two months ago.'

Steve turned round. 'Now that is a bit odd.'

Julie wanted to discuss the matter further, but Steve started unpacking his bag.

She looked at the bedside table. 'There's nothing up here to make a brew.'

'So go down and ask.'

'Okay.' Julie stood up.

'You sure you'll be all right on your own?'

'Funny.'

She walked down the corridor and staircase. In the hallway three closed doors confronted her. She froze, her ears exploring the house. She tapped on the nearest door and entered a small, tidy kitchen.

A half-open door led into another room. Julie nearly called out, but decided to hold her silence a little longer. Through the doorway she could see little more than one wall of the room. Midway down its length was what must have been the mirror she'd seen from the driveway. A dark – almost black – wood framed the glass, adding bulk to an already substantial piece, which was almost the height of the room itself. The wood had been carved, and though Julie's expectation told her this would be intricate and ornate, there was something crude and raw about the end

result. The carving seemed more like wounds than an attempt to embellish.

Julie wanted to study the mirror in more detail, and walked forwards, her footsteps suddenly clumsy. She saw a bottle containing a red liquid, stood beside the mirror.

The landlady slipped through the half-open door. Perhaps she'd been standing in front of the mirror all along. 'Can I help you?' Her eyes drilled into Julie, forcing her back.

'We were just wondering... if we could have some tea.'

The landlady stepped forwards, her hand groping for the handle behind. She pulled the door shut. 'Of course. I'll bring some up.'

She stood in silence as Julie left the kitchen.

Steve was lying down when Julie entered the bedroom. She sat down on the bed beside him. 'I knew we should've been suspicious.'

'Where's the tea?'

'On the other side of the kitchen there's another room, which she didn't want me to enter.'

'So she wants a bit of privacy.'

Julie shook her head. 'She didn't want me to get close to *it*.'

'What?'

'A seven-foot high mirror. There was something about it.'

'Your imagination's running wild,' Steve said.

A knuckle tapped on the door. After a brief pause the landlady walked in. Tea slopped from two porcelain cups onto a wooden tray. Julie pulled a paper handkerchief from her pocket to wipe the cups as they were passed to her. The landlady looked at Julie and smiled. Then she left.

Steve sat on the bed as he sipped tea. Then he placed his cup on the carpet and jumped up.

'Where are you going?' Julie asked.

'To look at the visitors' book. I'm curious why no one's been here in two months.'

'I don't think you should...'

He slammed the door behind him.

Julie put down her tea. The ornate cup only just remained upright on the thick carpet. Surely the landlady could have brought two saucers.

The door flung open and Steve entered, leafing through the pages of the visitors' book as he sat down on the bed. 'Well, you're right about the last guests.'

'You didn't bring it up here just to tell me that?'

He pulled a mobile phone out of Julie's handbag. 'No, I'm going to satisfy my curiosity – and yours.'

'How?'

'Directory enquires. Then I'll ring the last guests. Perhaps they'll be able to tell us something.'

He called, scribbled down a number, then dialled again.

Silence.

'Hello. Can I speak to Isabel, please.'

For a minute he listened, his face beginning to turn pale. 'I'm so sorry. I had no idea. I called out of curiosity really, as Isabel's was the last entry in the visitors' book.'

He went on to explain, as best he could, the location of the bed and breakfast.

When finished he put the phone back into the handbag.

'Well?' Julie tried to smile.

'That was her father. She went missing about two months ago.'

'Stop winding me up.' Julie looked into his eyes, willing him to start laughing. But his face was drained.

'She was sightseeing in the area. And then... she just disappeared.'

'Steve, this isn't funny any more.'

'He sounded so lost, wondering when his daughter would come home.' Steve jumped up from the bed. 'Well, we can't stay here.'

Julie exhaled. 'You want to leave?'

'Yes, right now.'

'Okay.' She picked up her overnight bag.

Steve pushed the door open and tiptoed down the corridor to the staircase. Julie followed close behind. One step from the bottom, she paused. Somewhere beyond the kitchen door she could hear the landlady humming to herself. Julie and Steve waited a few more seconds, then crossed the hallway to the front porch.

To Julie's relief, the door opened silently. Steve's feet crunched on the gravel as he walked to the car. He placed his bag beside the boot, but didn't unlock the doors.

'What are you waiting for?' Julie whispered.

'Aren't you curious? We could peep through the window – see what she's up to.'

Julie would have argued, but her curiosity was also roused. If the landlady appeared to be completely genuine perhaps they could return to their room and pretend none of this had happened. She didn't relish the thought of sleeping in the car.

As Steve walked back towards the house, Julie tiptoed to catch up. They peered through the window into the room with the mirror. No one was inside. The bottle of red fluid had also disappeared.

Steve walked round the corner of the house. When Julie joined him he was mesmerised, his eyes held by whatever was inside the next room.

Someone lay in a bath. Facing the wall opposite the window, only the back of their head was visible. Julie couldn't see the contents of the bath. Perhaps the two bottles on the floor beside, half-filled with a red liquid, were a clue. Her mind began to torment her with possible explanations.

For a split second Julie saw a figure reflected in the window, then Steve's

head thumped against the glass. The person in the bath didn't move. Then her own head smarted for an instant and she lost consciousness.

When Julie came round she was in the room with the mirror. The landlady was standing in front of it. Julie struggled against the handcuffs that tied her hands behind her back. Another pair bound her ankles. As she watched she realised the landlady's gaze wasn't directed towards her own reflection in the glass, but the surrounding frame. She was admiring the mirror itself.

On hearing Julie stir, the landlady walked over. She brushed back the hair from Julie's face, and inspected the wound on the side of her head.

'It's nothing too serious. But you may have a headache for a while.'

'Where's Steve?' Julie demanded.

'He can't be with you right now.'

'You mean he's dead.'

Silence reinforced Julie's worst fear.

'You bitch!'

'Isabel. My name is Isabel.'

Julie's head throbbed, unable to extract sense from the blur of ideas that spun round inside. Was this the woman who went missing two months ago?

'Who did we see lying in the bath?' Julie demanded.

'Miss Rondey, of course.'

'Is she dead?'

'Quite dead.' Isabel laughed.

'Why?'

'The mirror told me to. Once it has shown the future, you cannot resist. No one can ignore what is meant to be.'

'It's only a mirror, for God's sake.'

'How wrong you are. The day I arrived here it called to me. I waited until Rondey went out, then came in here and gazed into its face. The mirror promised me things, but it needs blood to be whole. That's why I had to kill her. And she was in the way: it has chosen me as its servant in the living world.'

Isabel left the room, returning moments later with a bottle. It was filled with what looked like blood.

'The time has come for you to see.' She placed the bottle by the mirror and walked over to Julie, taking hold under her arms. Isabel pulled her forward with surprising ease, but enough care not to hurt her.

Now Julie could see the mirror in detail for the first time. Her reflection had a faint ghost, and she realised that there was a second sheet of glass in the frame, as if it were double-glazed. The wood was riddled with knots, the grain varying vastly in thickness, suggesting it was from a tree whose growth had not been subjected to the discipline of the seasons. Julie sensed that it had grown with such agonised contortions that the craftsman had struggled to cut the lengths of timber need for the rectangular frame. The crude carvings depicted gargoyle-like figures,

their arms reaching inwards, trying to fondle and caress the mirror's surface. They mingled and merged with one another in an orgy that circumnavigated the glass.

'Like all of us, Miss Rondey was put on the earth to serve a purpose,' Isabel said as she picked up the bottle once more. She pulled a stool forward, standing on it to pour liquid into the top of the mirror.

Julie expected blood to flow out across the frame and glass, but half a pint or so was absorbed.

Isabel stepped down. 'This is a mere foretaste.'

For a moment nothing happened. Then the blood appeared in the top of the glass, seeping down the gap between the two sheets. Surface tension slowed its progress.

'The mirror of ages,' Isabel declared. 'Past, present and future: all are revealed.'

Julie watched as shapes in the blood became more defined. At first the fluid entered the mirror exactly as she'd expected. But slowly some other force took hold, making it spread erratically, forming puddles that seemed to defy gravity as they slid across the mirror. Now the blood moved in patterns for which Julie had no explanation.

She saw a woman, Miss Rondey – the real Miss Rondey, elderly, frail – lying down in a bath that contained no water. Then fluid began to appear, as though seeping up through the plug hole. As the bath filled, Miss Rondey became lifeless, her body deflated and shrivelled.

Then the image slipped down the mirror as gravity took control once more. After it had disappeared, more flowed in from the top to take its place. Now Julie saw Steve. He too was lying in the bath, which gradually filled at his expense.

'Past and present,' Isabel commented.

The image flushed itself away.

Fresh blood spread out across the clean canvas. A picture of the mirror appeared within itself. A woman stood in front, apparently admiring her own image. But Julie knew better than to think that this was the source of her fascination.

'The mirror knows your presence,' Isabel said. 'And it will show you your future.'

Then a second woman appeared in the mirror, standing alongside the first. Julie jerked back as the blood brought the two faces into sharp relief.

Isabel unlocked the handcuffs. 'I was expecting you to come. The mirror never lies.'

Julie wanted to run, but she couldn't turn away from the image. She felt hypnotised. Her eyes focused on the blood, then the reflection of the room, and back again. She looked at herself through the mirror, then on its surface. The two images appeared to mimic each other. She shifted position on the floor. Her reflection seemed to linger until its red doppelganger had time to flow across the glass. The mirror was playing a game with her. The two images merged again,

unhurried in their movement.

The blood began to fall once again. Her gaze remained until the last of it had drained away. And at that moment the only emotion she felt was a hunger to see more. She looked at Isabel. 'You said that was a foretaste.'

Isabel regarded her approvingly. 'Oh, yes. When the blood is fresh the mirror can reach further into the past, further into the future.' She disappeared into the bathroom.

Julie knew she'd gone to Steve's body. She felt revulsion, as she should have done from the moment she'd woken. But already the cure for her remorse was clear: the mirror offered an inexplicable comfort.

When Isabel returned she held aloft another bottle. Julie watched her pour the blood into the upper frame of the mirror. Once again it absorbed the fresh supply, indifferent to the impatience of its audience. Julie thought she could see the gargoyles squirming and writhing in pleasure as they fed. But as soon as the first streams of red seeped into the glass, she was oblivious to them.

Now the scene was ancient; centuries old. Men with torches searched a night landscape. In the distance was a woman, roped to a stake. She twisted in imitation of the flames that danced around her, while a euphoric crowd looked on. A man holding a chisel stood in front of the mirror. He was admiring it, smiling. Then four of the torch-bearers appeared, grabbing him, dragging him away. But he was without fear, gazing into the mirror, feeding off its strength.

The shapes became meaningless and slid downwards.

In their place more blood flowed. Now the mirror reached further in distance rather than time. Julie saw the inside of her parents' house. Her father was striking her mother, driving her into the corner of the room. Terrified eyes looked straight back at Julie, pleading. She felt sick, but also released from something she'd known for years but had always denied. The mirror revealed the truth; it meant no more running from the dark corners of her mind. She imagined how much more it could show her; how many nightmares would evaporate with its simple exposition. It would cleanse her.

The glass cleared itself once more.

Julie now understood Isabel's enthusiasm for the fresher blood. Her heart raced in anticipation, her own blood clearing her mind in expectation of what was to come.

More blood dripped from the top frame. The previous flow seemed like a waterfall in comparison. This time only the thinnest runnel weaved through the glass. It accumulated in the centre of the mirror, spreading outwards only when enough had collected to serve its purpose. Once again the mirror replicated its own image. But this time only one person stood in front. Like the ancient woodcarver, she too looked adoringly at the creation before her. The oozing fluid divided into fine traces, adding more definition to the image.

Julie studied the face.

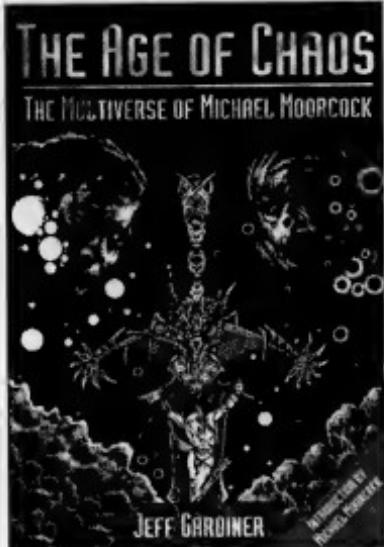
Isabel recoiled from the mirror.

Julie saw only herself.

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A Night Out

Angela Rigby

The lights of the suburban station moved backwards, increasing in speed as the train raced into darkness. I sat back and looked at the three passengers in my section of the carriage.

Opposite me was a middle-aged couple – he dressed in a neat suit and unbuttoned raincoat, she in a smart coat with an expensive piece of jewellery pinned to the lapel. Like myself, I guessed, on their way up to London for a night out.

Across the aisle a woman sat on her own. She too was well dressed in a dark suit, her blonde hair swept upwards in Mrs Thatcher style. The coat on the table in front of her though was surprisingly shabby. Somewhere in her thirties I thought. She was turned a little towards me and I noted an unusually pale complexion, bright red lipstick and somewhat unfocussed blue eyes. They reminded me of something, and after a moment I placed it. In my work at the drop in centre for substance mis-users I had clients with eyes like that!

I turned and looked out at the dark, thinking of my meeting with Geoffrey at Charing Cross, of the meal we would have and the show we had booked for. My reflection travelled through the night flying through telegraph poles, bushes, trees and the backs of houses. The middle-aged couple travelled with me. All of us like aliens in a parallel universe. And then I noticed that the woman on the other side of the aisle had no reflection at all.

I remained still. Probably it had something to do with the angle of her seat in relation to the window. Or perhaps she had got up and left while I looked away. I glanced back at her. She sat in the same position. I looked again at the window. She wasn't there. There was just the old coat on the table. Coldness went through me like the reaction to an explosion – to a policeman knocking at the door – to hideous televised news. The muscles of my legs hurt with shock. The couple opposite remained sedate and silent and the train hummed gently. My fear was that she would notice that I had noticed. So I had to remain where I was. And the presence of the couple gave me protection. The direction of my eyes was difficult, the options being few. I could look ahead at the couple, down at the table or out of the window where the three of us were flying. The first was potentially embarrassing, the second slightly odd and the third terrifying. I rummaged in my handbag as quietly as I could, feeling that the strange blue eyes would turn in my direction at a sound. I found a small diary and pretended to search through it. I wrote a few words in the note section but that only took a minute or two. I could lean back and shut my eyes but the thought of not seeing was worse. Finally I focussed on the aisle between us, looking at the seats and the advertisements above them at an angle which placed her out of view. But my eyes moved

irresistibly to the left catching a glimpse of the blonde hair and the dark suit.

I don't know when or whether she left the train at Charing Cross. I presumed she would have to as I did. I just opened the nearest door, felt the reassurance of the platform under my feet and made for the barrier.

'You alright Greta?' said Geoffrey as I reached him. 'You're white.'

'Get me somewhere I can have a drink,' I said. 'My legs are going.'

I had a stiff vodka at a nearby bar and told him. He looked at me rather blankly.

'You think I'm as mad as a meat rack don't you?' I said.

'No – but it seems unusual. It must have been something to do with the light.'

'You know what doesn't have a reflection don't you?'

He thought for a moment. 'Vampires?'

We sat in silence.

'Okay' he said. 'So we have a female vampire living in the suburbs somewhere and travelling to London for a night out. Where would she get the money for a ticket?'

'She could work,' I said – and after some thought, 'She could do night shifts.'

'What about the eating problem – she couldn't keep attacking the other members of her shifts. And she'd have to do some shopping – for clothes for instance.'

'She could do that at night before or after her shift.'

'And she lives in a house?' He had the faintest smile.

'A family house – left to her. And she could keep the curtains drawn.' The corners of my mouth were lifting a little too. 'And she could sleep all day.'

The conversation developed into an entire itinerary of the life of a modern vampire – with the addition of Internet banking, everything paid by Direct Debit and a telephone to contact other vampires. By the time we reached the restaurant we were laughing so much that other customers looked perturbed.

The show was great and Geoffrey travelled with me via taxi back to Charing Cross.

'Mind the vampire,' he joked. 'She might fly across the carriage at you.'

I looked down the long lighted platform and at the dark beyond, and felt a little cold.

'Okay.' I laughed. But my eyes were searching ahead for a figure with blonde hair.

The carriage had a dozen or so people and an air of warmth and chat. There was no sign of her, but I didn't look out of the window. It was as if there could this time be someone flying outside – looking in at me. I had an evening paper and concentrated on reading – keeping my eyes within the square frame of the page. At my station I jumped down onto the platform and the blonde woman stepped down from the next carriage. She turned slightly towards me, her pale eyes not

seeming to look at anything at first, then they focussed and we made eye contact. People milled round and past us as I stood unable to move. Then she turned and walked slowly towards the exit – unsteadily, putting one foot carefully before the other. It was a small station and not well lit. I waited until there were people between us and then reached the barrier and ran for the nearest available taxi. I sat back – breathing deeply to compensate for the seeming absence of oxygen. Her eyes had told me that she knew – that she was aware of me and of my knowledge of her. I felt the fear of normality collapsing.

I shared a nineteen thirties semi with four other young professional people and the immediate comfort of their presence cancelled out the possibility of having seen a vampire on a train. I didn't mention the incident and we talked and laughed over cups of tea and chocolate – sharing experiences of evenings out and romantic happenings. I wanted to keep the woman out of the house within the confines of a train that carried its unrelated cargo of individuals through the night to their different destinations. I imagined them dispersing into the dark – the good, the murderers, the unknown.

My bedroom was on the ground floor at the front of the house overlooking a small square garden that was edged with various shrubs. I gave a last glance outside and pulled the curtains together, undressed and combed my hair. I sat up in bed and read a few chapters as I always do and listened to the others settling down until it went quiet. It became night when the unreasonable is reality. Glancing up from my book to the window for a moment I noted a slight gap in the curtains. I read on – pretending not to notice. I switched the light off and settled down under the duvet – pulling it up to cover chin and ears. I supposed there are always noises but now I started hearing them. There was a creaking from the house, and then what sounded like a faint scratching. Geoffrey and I had wondered if she went hunting at night. He described her coming up to my window and looking in – her blue eyes becoming red lights. I looked up over the duvet at the window and there seemed to be movement. Possibly the shadow of a tree. At no point did I actually believe any of it. I knew it was ridiculous. But still I got up and went to the window. There was sufficient light to see the bushes swaying into black forms. There was something shining amongst the leaves -possibly a reflection from the nearby street lamps. To my imagination it resolved itself into two points like eyes. A shape flitted across the lawn.

I pulled the curtains tightly together and climbed back into bed – keeping the light on. I listened. Occasionally a car passed and I hung to the sound until it was nothing. Distant trains passed on the half hour, comforting for a few minutes. The clock in the communal living room chimed on and on towards morning. There were cries. Shrieks from an urban vixen and others that sounded human.

I leant against the table – shattered – drinking my first cup of tea. It was Sunday and one of the others sat opposite with a morning tabloid.

She yawned. 'They've found a couple more druggies dead on the streets up in

London,' she said. 'It's ridiculous this can happen in the fourth richest country in the world. At least we could give them somewhere to sleep.'

I made assenting noises.

'They were found crouched in doorways,' she said. 'And the police can't make it out. The bodies are unusually pale and they seem to have been using two large needles on the inner arm.'

My mouth stopped moving and closed on the edge of the cup. I remembered the drugged eyes.

I worked hard during the following week, trying to put the nonsense out of my mind. I listened to clients, sympathised and wrote careful reports. I was the bright and cheerful soul of the centre. Terry came in on Tuesday. He was somewhere in his twenties and arrived for a quiet place to sit and sleep, to have a cup of tea and perhaps a chat. I noted his tall body half slumped across a table as usual. He wore his invariable yellow and blue raffia hat that pulled down over his forehead like a tea cosy. There was little hope for him. He had been dropping acid tabs for years and medical opinion assessed his mind as irreparably damaged. He had a room but tended to sleep rough wherever his trips took him. I sat opposite him for a while and tried to make conversation. His eyes registered me for a few moments and then closed.

The nights got worse. I lay in the dark convinced that her pale face was pressed against the window, aware of my presence and trying to see in. There was a connection between us. Despite all the determination of will I could bring to prevent myself I had to lie facing the window. The thought of her being behind me and finding someway to undo the catch and step in was intolerable. I tossed onto my back for a few moments and looked up at the ceiling. Shadows moved across it. I tossed back onto my side and watched the curtains for movement. I had reached the point of being unable to get out of bed in case the movement attracted her attention – even turning the light on was impossible. I was tired to the point of hysteria and only fell into a dead sleep as dawn turned the dark into royal blue.

On Thursday evening I phoned Geoffrey and begged him to come down and spend at least Friday night with me. I wanted him to drive out with me to see if we could find her.

'Greta,' he said quietly. 'You know there are no such things as vampires.'

'Yes, of course I know. All of my head knows – but my stomach doesn't. I have like cold water streaming through me all night. The rest of me needs to know.'

He agreed to come. I intended to be out most or all of the night if necessary – but made up a sleeping bag for him on the floor in any case. We were not yet on such terms for anything else. He arrived around seven o'clock and we started by going out for a meal.

'What do we take?' he asked – politely but humorously. 'Garlic and crucifixes?'

'I hadn't thought,' I said. 'And I don't think I've got either. Although Anne is a Catholic and she might lend me a cross of some kind.'

'Where do people get vampire stakes from?' he asked. 'They always seem to have them to hand in films.'

'They probably have a constant supply in places like Transylvania,' I replied coldly. 'But I don't think we could suddenly attack a respectable looking woman with a stake. It might attract some attention.'

'So what are we doing?'

'Just anything – to see if we can find her. I know we might not in one night – it could take weeks. But we've only got Friday night and perhaps Saturday. I want to see what she's doing. She knows about me. I feel I've been identified by something evil that can see beyond the world as we see it. I'm a danger to her – she doesn't want to be known.'

'Well if we can't stake her I don't see how we can stop it.'

'But if we see her going quietly into a house and not coming out again – then it's just me having a breakdown or something and I can go and ask for some tranquillisers.'

But I knew she wouldn't be going quietly into a house. As soon as it was reasonably dark we started touring the area – beginning with my house where we parked outside for a while. The lights were on upstairs and we could hear distant pop songs. We moved on and it became darker. I hadn't had the face to ask Ann for a crucifix but found my old christening cross and fixed it round my neck. I could see that Geoffrey was getting concerned about me. We drove and parked down pretty well every street in the town. At three o'clock in the morning we stopped near the local park and snuggled down for a while for some rest. Geoffrey's presence and the cross comforted me and I dozed off. It was past four o'clock when I was woken by a shriek.

'What's that?'

Geoffrey started up from a half doze. 'A fox – there'll be several in the park.'

I leant forward and rubbed the steam of our breaths from the windscreen. 'Geoffrey – look!'

Several yards ahead of us the figure of a woman was walking away. Geoffrey rubbed his section of the windscreen and peered. 'Somebody going to work on an early shift.'

'Follow her.'

'Wait a moment. She'll notice if I start the engine up suddenly and then she'll think we're kerb crawlers.'

We waited and watched. The figure turned left. Geoffrey turned on the ignition and we moved forward gently.

'Don't put your lights on.'

'Bloody hell – I won't see where I'm going. And I'll get caught.'

'We'll have to get out of the car then and walk. Have you got a torch?'

He rummaged in the glove compartment and found one. 'Okay.'

We trod as lightly as we could and turned left. At the end of a short road large iron gates barred the entrance to the old cemetery that bordered one end of the park.

'You see where she's gone?' I said.

Geoffrey sighed impatiently. 'She probably lives in one of the end houses.'

We reached the gates. They were held together by a chain and padlock. There was no sign of the woman now.

'We can't get in,' he said.

'Yes we can. I know this park. You can get over the wall a few yards along to the left. The users are always coming here.'

I worked my way through the bushes and found where the wall had been worn down to a climbable height. Geoffrey went first and then pulled me up and over. It was dark except that the large old table type tombstones showed pale shapes among the grass. We crept from stone to stone holding hands to keep in contact. I had never before been in a cemetery at night and the reality of it suddenly struck me. I remembered an account I had once read of a priest walking through a churchyard and seeing a large black dog snarling viciously on the grave of a man who had died unrepentant. I stopped.

'Can we sit down for a minute?'

We reached the path and found a low kerbstone. I sat down shivering with cold and fright. Geoffrey put one arm round me – hugging me to him.

'Do you like me?' I whispered.

'Very much,' he said.

I hadn't realised until then that he actually loved me although it seemed a bit obvious now in relation to his willingness to sit in a cold graveyard in the early hours of the morning with a nut-case who believed she was being haunted by a vampire. I felt for the first time that I could perhaps care about him a lot. I also felt safer. Love was a defence. I put my hand on the little cross. It was still quite dark but not absolutely silent. There were odd little creaks and clicks from somewhere. I had a mental image of something snuffling through the grass to my feet and automatically drew them back under my skirt. I listened intently and there seemed to be another sound.

'Can you hear it?' I asked.

'What?'

'It's a bit like a dog lapping. Let's walk.'

We kept to the grass to quieten our footsteps and then my foot knocked against something soft. I bent down and put my hand out. 'Your torch.'

The light shone on a blue and yellow raffia hat like a tea cosy and a pale face with open eyes.

'Oh no,' I said. 'Terry.' He lay on his back, one arm thrown out and facing upwards. I shook him gently. 'Terry – can you hear me?'

Geoffrey felt for a neck pulse. 'There's nothing,' he said. 'I think he's gone.' He shone the torch over him and onto the arm. Two large puncture marks showed up in the light. 'He's been shooting up.'

'No - never. He only used acid.' I sat back on my heels. 'We'd better get the police.'

'Look.'

The sky was grey now and we could see across the graves. There was a movement ahead of us. We crouched down. A dim figure was standing in the middle of the path and twirling round with her arms outstretched like wings. In the lightening sky I could see the blonde hair.

'What time is it?'

He looked at his watch. 'Nearly five.'

She staggered off the path and climbed up onto one of the table tombs, using a fallen section and jumping with remarkable agility. She started twirling again.

'She's on a trip,' I said.

She threw her arms above her head and then held them out like a plane about to take off. Her face in the increasing light was senseless and happy.

'What happens to a vampire who OD's?' I whispered. 'They're undead already.'

'Greta, she's just a poor mad woman - maybe on drugs as well. We could tell your centre about her,' he said. 'Or the police could pick her up. I've got my mobile.'

'Geoffrey,' I cried. 'She's on a trip. She's forgotten the sun.'

It was coming - the light spreading over houses and trees - over granite obelisks, round topped head stones and marble angels. The figure went on twirling. A slight wind blew, moving leaves. The edge of the bright orange disk sent out a stream of light. There was a deranged howl.

Geoffrey shot to his feet and ran. 'She's falling.'

She spun and contorted in the increasing wind. We raced towards her. Something like ashes or dust showered over us and was hot against our faces and in our hair. We stood together looking at the old coat and other clothes lying empty on the stone.



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Silvie

Debra Williams

It was a sign everyone initially missed. Methodically piled one on top of another on a decaying hollow log in the centre of a sunlit copse, a handful of smooth, flat stones formed a crude memorial. On first sight, its conical design ironically gave the appearance of a child's stacking ring toy. That in itself made the discovery inside the fallen tree trunk even more heinous.

'Go on Chris, give us a go with it.' Mikey skipped crab style alongside his brother, eyes fixed on the gun's glinting barrels swinging inches from the furrowed dirt path. His fingers twitched at the thought of the cold metal in his hands and the power it evoked. It had become an obsession.

'A go? You don't have a *go* with one of these things, Mikey. It ain't a bloody toy.' Chris stopped mid stride. He snatched at the fraying lapel of Mikey's oversized denim jacket, pulling him up on tiptoe, a sharp nail scratching a red track across his collarbone.

If he felt the scratch he didn't show it. 'It's cool Chris, I know what I'm doing. I've watched ya. I won't tell Mam.'

'You little...' Chris shoved Mikey away as if he'd handled something filthy. Mikey wouldn't tell Mam, but he sure as hell would if he didn't get his turn. And then what would Mam do?

Chris looked at Mikey through the darkness, wriggling his puny frame back into his jacket, turning up the collar in an attempt to appear hard. That had been him a few years ago – a cocky little sod who thought he knew it all.

'Black's Woods, you can blast a couple of rabbits up there.' Chris relented, a sadistic smirk playing on his lips. He flicked his head towards a dark mass of trees nestled on a rise in the distance.

'Black's Woods? I ain't going up there, not at gone three in the morning. The place's bloody haunted.'

'Stop bloody swearing, and anyway, it ain't haunted.'

'Well what about—?'

'What about what, Mikey? What about all them tales me and the lads tell when a bit of grass is being passed round? Stories Mikey, to scare you shitless half the time. I mean, look at ya. Thirteen years old...'

'Fourteen.'

'All right, fourteen. Jeez, when I was fourteen I was camping out in them woods with nothing but a plastic sheet between me and whatever you reckon is out there.'

'Not in Black's Woods you didn't. Mam says..'

'Mam says....Mam says. For crying out loud Mikey, do you want a go with

the gun, or what?"

Silence hung. Mikey stared at his brother, dusk masking his expression. Do or die time.

Despite the element of fear, Black's Woods held a sinister fascination with Mikey. When the mad, shouting house finally let sleep wash over it and all were huddled together like rats in a nest, he would take his time out, shove open his poky little window, and climb out to sit on the ledge. He'd kick the rough brick with his bare heels, skin hardened like the rest of him, and smoke a fag end or the discarded nub of a joint salvaged from one of Chris's gang gatherings.

It didn't take long for his eyes to adapt to the dim light of moon glow. He'd sit as fresh, cool air stung his nostrils, wiping away the stale stink of a house neglected by a tribe of unruly kids who knew nothing better, and a token figurehead of a mother who knew even less. Streetwise instincts sharpened his wits. Something was in the air and always his attention was forced to focus on the ebony patch of woodland on one of a series of rises that flanked the small village.

It didn't take much to scare Mikey. The wood itself was an ominous presence, jet black and scowling on the skyline. Then there was the real story of Black's Woods, and that, exaggerated and with menace, was enough. Stories of real horror, not half a mile from where they lived. A small hand held out in trust, led far away from innocence and make-believe and all that a child should know and taken to a scene of darkness and shelter and privacy. And hurt. She never returned.

Stories of Silvie.

Sometimes Mikey even thought he'd seen her while he sat out on his ledge in the darkness, skipping in and out of the trees edging the wood like nothing in the world mattered, a trail of long blonde hair flapping like a pennant flag. He'd strain his eyes, concentrating; squinting and barely breathing but aware that every breath he took sounded like thunder. Like if she was there, she could hear him. Yet as much as he didn't want to get spotted by a spook, he felt an affinity that compelled him to scrutinise the shape so way off he couldn't possibly have made it out even in daylight.

Sometimes he didn't even see anything. At those times it was more of a feeling, an intense draw, stimulated more often than not after Chris had had a go or Mam had turned nasty when the drink had run out.

Chris was already on his way to the woods, skirting the edge of a newly ploughed field, poacher's wits directing his route by the camouflage of a territorial hedgerow.

'You'd better let me have my turn when we get there.' Mikey's tone turned tough, suddenly brave out of his brother's easy reach.

Chris picked up on the tone but gave it the recognition he considered it deserved. None. 'You'll have your turn, Mikey. You'll have your turn.'

It was enough. Mikey was going to get a feel of the gun, a real go. He instinctively followed; the same dodging walk, stooped shoulders, eyes alert, ears

pricked. Despite the torment and beatings and his every sense screaming out that he hated everything that was his brother and his life, he imitated without thought. You were either in or out, and the scars he bore for being in told him more than enough about what it would be like to be out.

Black's Woods stood solemn on a slight vantage point beyond the village's boundary walls. Mikey stopped at the top of the field then turned, making out the snaking street lights which led the way to his house; where Mam lay gin sodden and the rest of the kids were tucked up, likely frantic in dream state, stricken by the stories he'd told them. Like Chris had told him.

'I don't know, Chris. There don't look like there's much here.' He turned back to where Chris had been stood by a spindly gorse. 'Chris?'

A slithering gust of air spread through the trees, emerging as a low, drawn out whistle.

'Chris—?'

'GOTCHA.' Chris stalked up behind him, grabbed him tight round the throat and emitted bestial growls in his ear. It didn't take much to scare the crap out of his little brother and he knew he hated the dark, and being on his own, that's why he shared his room with the two youngest. He'd come over as the hero of the piece, looking after the young 'uns, but he knew that was just a front. The lad was born sensitive. He could see right through to his soul, which was weak. He could have a pop at being the big man, but Chris knew he couldn't follow through. That's what he was working on, toughening the kid up in his own sadistic way. It was for his own good.

'You bloody stupid—' Mikey spat the words out. He flapped a hand at the head pushing down on his shoulder, vainly attempted to pull back the fingers round his neck with the other.

'You stupid what? Who're you calling stupid, Mikey boy?' Chris let him go. He swung a stinging swipe at the back of Mikey's head.

Mikey fumed. A knot of humiliation wedged in his throat. If that had been one of the kids, or one of *his* gang, he'd have...

He'd have what?

A loud crack restored his attention. Chris had loaded the gun.

'Coming, or what?' His face was shadowed. Even in the half-light his anger was evident. Mikey had worn down his patience.

Without a backwards glance, he barged through thicket and bracken. Mikey remained rooted. He watched Chris's stocky form disappear into the depths of the wood; heard the sharp splits of fallen branches as they fragmented under heavy boots. A wave of hate made him feel sick.

'Mikey boy...' A girlish giggle drifted out on a current of air. His hair flustered. He strained to hear.

To hear what?

It filtered away.

The harder he listened, the less he heard; except the odd crunch of woodland

floor matter as Chris ventured even further into the black.

Another breeze swept by and he stopped to let it wash over him like he did when he sat out on the ledge. When he'd mull over stuff until the confusion settled into something half understandable. Not that his world made much sense most of the time.

He couldn't hear Chris at all now, just darkness, if it were a sound, and his own breathing which was beginning to quicken as he became increasingly aware that his brother was nowhere close. He was alone, it was dark, and he was stood on the edge of Black's Woods. Jeez, he was scared enough when he looked out at it from his window. What the hell did he think he was doing? A pulse of panic flipped in his chest and he flicked his head from side to side, looking for something he'd rather not see. He hadn't heard it. It was his imagination. Stories, just stories.

Stories based on fact.

Above him the half moon began to dip away on its orbiting journey and the deep denim sky glittered with a splattering of dimming stars. A soft amber hue tinged the skyline.

Quiet settled. Disconcerting.

Fingers stroked his neck; cold, they initiated a surge of goose bumps.

'I said get off, Chris.' He flinched, fists clenched to strike.

Nothing. No-one. The broad line of trees wavered. Twisted branches groaned.

'The hunter...or the hunted...?' Childlike, it trailed off, taunting.

'Chris. Wait. Come back, don't go in there.' He started towards an opening in the trees.

Paused.

No reply.

He began to run, erratically, spurred on by tales from a lowlife crowd who gained kicks from his mental torture.

But this was real.

'Mikey boy...' She called him, calm and carefree; inviting.

He lunged into forest shadows, splayed like draped fabric over misshapen undergrowth. The hunter or the hunted? The words stuck in his mind as he bounced off tree trunks.

Children's laughter pursued, high and happy. He clamped his hands over his ears, struggling to keep his balance.

'Step out of his shoes, Mikey boy...' The voice clearer now, enveloping him in surround sound as he stumbled through mounds of decaying leaves, fetid and wet.

'The hunter or the hunted? Your choice. Escape...'

He hit a tree. Stopped dead, winded from the force of the impact against his chest. He coughed, choking on panic as he clutched the rough bark like his life depended on it.

KH 02



Perhaps it did.

He spluttered for air, gasping, unaware that his lungs had automatically kicked back in almost immediately after the blow; he was choking on fright and he didn't care who knew it this time, so long as someone got him the hell out of there.

He tried madly to make sense of the words. Escape. Make his own choices. How? How?

Like had hadn't tried in the past. Oh yeah, Chris might have thought he was doing him a favour letting him have a go with the gun, but he'd had plenty of goes. Just not pulled the trigger, proper like, to kill something; just in his head with a whispered *POW* when he'd have both barrels aimed at Chris's pathetic passed-out-from-drink frame. Times when he was crashed out on the settee in an alcohol induced stupor, drooling like a baby. It could have been so easy.

The laughter continued, haunting his subconscious. But what did she want? Or who...him or Chris? It didn't make sense. What else was new?

'It's down to you, Mikey.'

The voice was louder now and he knew she was somewhere close.

Not that he knew where even he was. He wasn't sure how far into the woods he had run but he couldn't make out the edge anymore. He was surrounded by every shade of dusk, the only moonlight filtering down through gaps in wavering foliage from above. And he didn't like that much because it flickered on and off as swaying branches sliced its rays, breathing sinister life into normally inanimate objects.

Then he heard it.

'Leave me alone. Who are you? Shut the hell up or I'll have you. You'll eat a cartridge, I'm telling you.'

It was Chris, not far away, his voice becoming increasingly louder with each threat, fuelling himself on a surge of determination to actually do what he said he would. He was hearing Silvie too.

As if a light had switched on and woken him from a nightmare, she left Mikey, and for a moment he breathed easy. But she had settled her attention on Chris.

Sharp shuffling noises told Mikey that Chris was just ahead, and he knew that she was in his head as he envisaged him shifting in uneasy jerks through clumps of fern and crisp leaf fall, desperately searching out his tormentor.

Mikey felt strange as he made his way towards the noises, calm and unafraid. As if he had tasted fear and was cured, like someone who had let a snake slither over his skin when previously he not even been able to look at one in a book without breaking out in a cold sweat. His heart still thumped in audible time, but he had been forced over the edge and emerged unscathed.

'Stop asking stupid questions. I'm the hunter. Got the gun...see? Want a taste of it?'

The hunter or the hunted. The survival of the fittest.

Chris was flailing wildly with the gun as Mikey stepped out into the moonlit copse in the heart of Black's Woods.

'Stop laughing. I swear you'll get it.'

Chris was frantic now and Mikey knew that Silvie was persecuting him.

Like she had been persecuted, only nothing like as torturous. It was her turn now.

And Mikey's?

He closed in on his brother and noticed he was crying. He'd never seen Chris cry before and for a fleeting second, and it was fleeting, he felt a pang of pity. But then his brother always said he was a sensitive little sod.

The gun butt was wedged in Chris's left shoulder all the while he flinched at the onslaught. Then, all of a sudden, he stopped, and Mikey knew that *she* had stopped. Breathing in spasmodic, shallow breaths, Chris suddenly turned to face him, the barrels snapping cleanly in line with Mikey's head as he halted dead in his tracks. For a second Chris held him in his sights as if *he* was the enemy. Then he dropped the barrels slightly as he composed himself, realising it was just Mikey; just his simple little runt of a brother. Harmless and pathetic Mikey boy.

'We gotta get out of here, Chris. I told you. I didn't want to come in here in the first place. You should have listened.' Mikey began to ramble. It wasn't over and he knew it. The air lingered with a forbidding tang that stuck to the roof of his mouth with a foul taste. 'You listening up, Chris? We gotta get home. It's not safe. Chris? What are you doing? *Chris*?'

Slowly and deliberately, Chris raised the gun back in place, aiming straight at Mikey.

But looking beyond him.

'Chris?'

Realisation hit home like a hammer blow. Mikey jerked round, and that's when he saw her.

Silvie was sitting on that same decaying, hollowed out fallen tree trunk behind him, long hair the colour of winter Jasmine, eyes the shade of woodland bluebells. A small-bodied spider danced a weave through her ivory see-through fingers.

She giggled and they both heard it. She was staring straight through him and he instinctively looked back at Chris, finger poised and trembling on the trigger.

'Get out of the way, Mikey.'

Like a rabbit caught in a car's headlights, Mikey stood stock still, bug eyed and unblinking.

'I said, shift.'

The hunter or the hunted.

Mikey's head exploded with a myriad of frazzling thoughts, but all the while he kept his eyes fixed on the gun's glinting barrels; just like before, when he was itching to get his hands on it. Only now he understood the power of it. The pull. Its significance.

'NOW.'

As if fired from a set of starting blocks, Mikey lunged; towards the small dainty figure with an outline like smudged chalk. She was just a kid. Silvie calmly stood up to greet him as he charged at her; held out a small hand and smiled as her finger tips reached to meet his.

Then the shot rang out.

Time inched by, and all Mikey could think about was what it would feel like to touch her. Would he actually be able to feel her, solid and human? Then he had it, her hand, tiny and fragile and scrunched up tight in his as he attempted to drag her away from the blast. It felt just like his.

But his felt strange.

Then he was running like the wind, Silvie still holding the hand stretched out behind him. And he couldn't feel a thing, not even the ground beneath him or the lashings from long thorny bramble shoots that whipped up to tear into him. Just a sense of all consuming freedom like he had never felt before. He had defied Chris, instinctively knowing that he would never touch him again.

Could never touch him again.

He had stepped out of Chris's shoes and into his own, and it had been far easier than pulling the trigger ever would have been.

Silvie's high, sunny laugh once more broke into his thoughts and he slowed down to a stumbled stop. But it wasn't in his thoughts, he had heard it out loud, as clear and as real as night or day. He looked back at the smiling, pixie-like face; milky white and see-through like the hand that held his. Like his that held hers.

In the distance behind her, he watched his mortal body crumple and fall as the shotgun cartridge exploded in its chest.



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Talking to Strangers in Finsbury Park

Tina Rath

The flying saucer landed in Finsbury Park at about half-past seven on a rainy autumn evening. No one noticed. It had touched down in the back garden of the small terraced house which the Smiths were currently buying from their building society and none of the family happened to be looking out of the kitchen window at the time. Mr Smith was lying on the sofa, waiting for the football to come on, half dozing and half watching a programme in which a famous television expert was proving, very much to his own satisfaction, that it was impossible to communicate with creatures from outer space, always supposing that there were any, because 'there's just no common ground. Even if we could understand the words,' he insisted, flailing his arms to emphasise his point, 'we just couldn't understand the concepts.'

Mrs Smith was doing some ironing while she waited for Mr Smith to drop off completely so that she could switch over and watch a mini-series called *Sinners Wear Scarlet*. Jason Smith was in his bedroom, supposedly doing his homework, but in fact miming enthusiastically in front of his wardrobe mirror to the greatest hits of the Sabre Toothed Ferrets, and Samantha Smith, his small sister, was playing schools under the dining table, with a class made up of three Little Ponies, two teddy bears and a singing mermaid, silenced for lack of batteries.

This peaceful domestic scene was shattered by a knock at the back door. Mr Smith, who was half-expecting his brother-in-law to call round to borrow a tenner, stayed firmly where he was, closing his eyes to simulate deep sleep, and Mrs Smith went to the door. On opening it she saw, standing on the garden path and glowing faintly purple in the orange light that London reflected into the night sky, a figure out of nightmare. It was six feet tall and skeletally thin. It had no face to speak of, only a lipless mouth and fiery eyes. Mrs Smith, assuming, naturally enough, that this was an emissary from the television programme, You've Been Had, which she particularly disliked, was just about to shut the door firmly when she saw the huge, dully metallic looking saucer parked on her back lawn. Huddled disconsolately beside it were a medium sized version of the figure in front of her (wife? she wondered, wildly) and two smaller ones (the kiddies?). Mrs Smith recognised a family in need of help when she saw one and she looked more kindly at her caller.

The creature was holding up a small glowing capsule and for one ghastly moment she thought he was asking her to swallow it. Then she understood why he was tapping the side of his head, and realised that he meant her to put it into



her ear. With a vague feeling that it might be a good idea to humour him she did so. At once there was a burst of high-pitched crackling and a curiously mechanical voice in her ear said: 'This is a two-way translation facility, programmed by the Acme Pan-Galactica Translation Service for your convenience. Speak normally and it will translate your vocal efforts ... ' then

a more normal voice, clearly that of her visitor, cut in.

'Gracious Brood-Lady,' it said, 'can I desiderate the shelter of your jolly cavern for self and brood the while I holloa for a mechanic for my defunct vehicle?'

She gulped. But they did look miserable, standing there in the rain, and she was a good-hearted lady. She stood aside and let them in.

'Bit early for Halloween, isn't it?' said Mr Smith on seeing their visitors, but Mrs Smith shushed him hastily.

'Have you got one of these for my husband?' she asked in the high, careful voice she used for foreigners, tapping her capsule vigorously. Their visitor fumbled enthusiastically at his waist and produced a handful of capsules (from a belt? pocket? or could it be a pouch? she wondered).

'For the whole brood!' said the voice in her ear. Jason and Samantha had drifted up and were staring at the alien visitors.

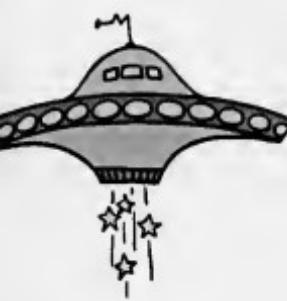
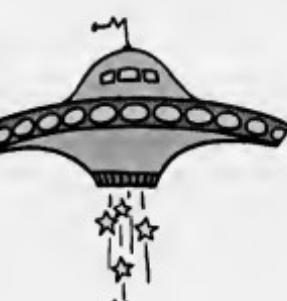
'Are we going to be abducted?' Jason asked hopefully, seeing the all-time cast iron excuse for not doing his homework about to be handed to him on a saucer.

'Now Jason don't be silly,' said Mrs Smith, distributing translation capsules, 'Mr and Mrs - er—' 'Vreel' said her capsule, 'Mr and Mrs Vreel have had a breakdown and they're going to wait here, out of the rain, until a man comes to fix their - er - saucer. Now why don't you take—' she indicated one of the smaller figures, who, by managing somehow to look oddly scruffy, even in that shiny metal skin, suggested that he must be a small boy, 'er—' 'Vreel,' said her capsule. 'Ah - why don't you take Vreel upstairs and show him your computer.'

'OK,' said Jason. 'Come on then,' he shambled up the stairs, followed by the small silvery figure.

'And perhaps - er —' she waved a hand at the other small one, 'Vreel,' said her capsule.

'Oh. Perhaps Vreel would like to see your dollies, Samantha.' (Surely they couldn't all be called Vreel! But then all her family were called Smith ... and perhaps there was some kind of variation that the



capsule was not conveying. There was certainly something to be desired in the Acme Translation Services grasp of idiomatic English.)

'Now, I'll get us all a nice cup of tea. Would you like to see the kitchen, Mrs Vreel? I bet it's a bit different from what you're used to ...'

She led the silent Mrs Vreel off to make some tea. She seemed rather subdued, as well she might, Mrs Smith thought, landed on a strange planet with two children, and no chance of getting them home before their bedtime, probably because that husband of hers hadn't had the saucer properly serviced. Mrs Smith began to get out her good china, and reached for a packet of biscuits – or rather, as it turned out, just a packet. The biscuits had been eaten and the empty shell left on the shelf. She crumpled it up, crossly.

Mrs Vreel glanced up. 'Does your brood-mate do that too?' she asked. 'Vreel is always leaving the empty grockets in the storage unit.'

'Does he leave the tops off jars as well?' said Mrs Smith.

Mrs Vreel nodded grimly. 'And he always opens a fresh jar of Vrillni before the last one's finished,' she said.

In less than two minutes they had moved on to gynaecology.

In the sitting-room Mr Vreel was showing Mr Smith the workings of the Acme Galactophone on which he had called the mechanic. Soon they were discussing hyper-warp drives ... Under the table Samantha and Vreel sat examining Samantha's class of 2002.

'Here,' said Samantha generously handing over the silent mermaid. 'Would you like to hold her? She's supposed to sing, but Father Christmas didn't bring the batteries.'

Vreel shyly took the doll and ran a thin, curiously jointed finger along her tail which turned a sort of rosy silver under her touch. The doll squirmed between her hands and began to comb her hair with her fingers, and to sing in a small, eerily sweet voice. It had become, to all appearances, a living, though miniature mermaid.

'That's clever,' said Samantha. 'How do you do that?'

The fair head and the metallic silver one bent towards each other. Soon three tiny ponies in unusual colours were trotting about under the table.

Upstairs Jason and Vreel sat on the floor.

'What's your planet like?' said Jason.

'Boring,' said Vreel. 'Yours?'

'I bet ours is more boring than yours.'

'Bet it's not.'

'Want to hear some really wicked sounds?'

'All right.'

The cries of the Sabre Toothed Ferrets scythed through the night air.

'Do your brood-parents ever let you turn the sound right up, properly?' said Vreel.

'No way,' said Jason. 'Yours?'

'Nah. But ...' he pointed at the cd player. A tiny simulacrum of the Ferrets manifested on top of it, and proceeded to enact their latest video.

They watched and listened.

When the door-bell rang it was Mr Vreel who answered it. 'Behold the mechanic!' he exclaimed, flinging the door open.

Mrs Smith, coming from the kitchen with a belated tray of tea almost screamed at the sight of the mechanic. It was hard to tell if there was a living creature inside the small space cruiser or if the cruiser was the mechanic. Whatever it was, it was huge and covered with flashing lights. It had altogether too many arms, most of which ended in some kind of tool. Apparently it had already examined the saucer and both Vreel and Smiths waited for his verdict.

The mechanic gave a sharp intake of breath. 'I suppose you know your big-end's gone,' it said. 'You know you're going to have problems with this, Squire. You just can't get the parts for these old models...'

However, it seemed he could offer the Vreels a tow. They hurried back to their saucer with sincere expressions of gratitude, promises not to forget their hosts, and pleas to look them up if they ever found themselves in the neighbourhood of Alpha Centauri ... The saucer closed, the mechanic positioned itself (himself? Mrs Smith wondered) on top and the whole thing ascended into the sky with a bright flash of light and a faint whooshing sound.

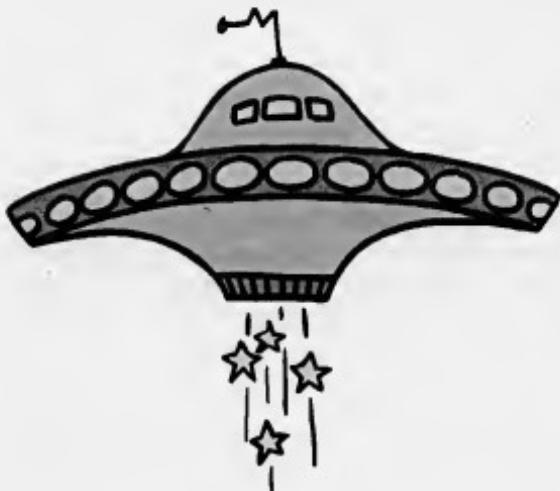
Jason Smith returned to his radically improved cd player. Samantha retired beneath the table to teach her ponies to jump over tiny hurdles constructed from pencils. Mr Smith lay down on the sofa. Mrs Smith picked up her iron.

'What a nice couple,' she said.

'Yes. Real pleasure to talk to, that chap,' Mr Smith agreed drowsily. 'Oh, turn the TV over if you like, love, I'll never stay awake for the match.'

Mrs Smith searched for the remote control. As she did so the television expert said: 'So, inter-species communication is quite impossible. I mean, what would you say to your goldfish, always supposing it could understand your words....'

Mrs Smith turned on her mini-series.



Coming Around Again

Nina Allan

The packing case was right at the back of the big cupboard under the eaves. Michael pulled it out into the light, out onto the floor of the attic room, and thought about what he should do. It was a large packing case, one of the old fashioned tea chests that people had always used for moving house when he had been a boy. He remembered hiding in one once, when he had moved with his parents from Penge to the house in St John's Wood. His mother had been wrapping up china in the kitchen, and he had simply crept inside and gone to sleep. The tea chest had still smelt of tea, and had been lined with silver foil. You never saw them now, he thought. That made him rather sad, because he liked old things, and because he liked the things he knew to stay the same.

The tea chest was plain apart from a number on the side, and the single bold black word 'Ceylon.' He thought it must be empty, or stuffed with newspapers or packing cloths. His first instinct had been to phone his solicitor, but he thought now that he had better open it first. It would look foolish, if the chest turned out to contain nothing more than some overlooked rubbish.

The board on the top was not even nailed down. When Michael removed it, a musky, sweetish smell came out. The smell of herbs, perhaps, or some exotic flower. There were women's clothes in the tea chest, lots of them. The clothes looked old, but not the kind of old you throw away. One of the dresses was in velvet, and of a red so deep that it was almost brown. It had a black lace edging. The other things were plainer, but still, he thought, quite beautifully made. There were two white blouses, each with a high lace collar. None of them were the sort of clothes that people put on nowadays. He wondered who they had belonged to, and how long ago.

At the bottom of the tea chest was an envelope. The envelope was long and brown, the kind of envelope that he might himself have used to send out somebody's account. It opened easily. The glue on the flap was so old it had dried out completely. Inside the envelope was a single sheet of white paper, folded into three. The note on it had been typewritten on what must have been an old machine. 'I'm no good for you,' it said. 'I know I only make you unhappy. I hardly feel I know you, even now, and I have come to realise you really don't know me. It would be pointless for us to go on seeing one another. Please try to understand.' There was no date, but the paper had gone slightly yellow around the edges. Reading it had felt a little like eavesdropping. Michael decided to give his solicitor a ring after all.

Three other parties had wanted to buy his house. He had thought of it as his from the moment he had first seen it. Maybe it had been precisely that passionate sense

of ownership that had ensured eventual possession. Michael was thirty three, he earned good money, but he had never owned a house before. Until that morning, he had lived with his parents in the house in St John's Wood. Aside from essentials such as books and clothing, he had never felt the need to spend the money he earned. He had only seen the house because a friend of a friend had wanted to buy it. He had gone for a drink with Edwin Fletcher one evening after work and Edwin had made him walk right past it.

'Will Barraclough's just put in an offer on that,' Edwin had said. 'Rich wanker.'

Over the three months it had taken to complete the sale, Michael had sometimes wondered what he would have done if it had been Edwin who had wanted the house, and not the other man. He did not dwell on this, though, because he hardly even knew William Barraclough, and William Barraclough had quickly started the process of buying another house entirely. It seemed that he had not found the house worth fighting for. There were a lot of other houses like it in the world.

The house was a three bedrooned terrace in a street not all that far from Earls Court tube. Muybridge Place, the street was called, a little cul de sac that branched out from the far end of Jarvis Mansions. There were only sixteen houses in Muybridge Place, two blocks of eight that faced each other across a road that led to nowhere. Michael's house was number eleven, the sixth down on the left. Aside from the three bedrooms on the first floor there was a living room, a dining room and kitchen, a box room leading off the stairs that the estate agent had referred to as the study, a bathroom, a second downstairs toilet, and of course the attic room upstairs. The house was far too big for Michael on his own. If anyone had told him a year ago that he would buy a house like this Michael would have thought them quite ridiculous. When the removal men had come that morning to his parents' home, Michael had had hardly anything for them to take. He had never in his life bought a piece of furniture. He had arranged to buy some of the pieces that were already in the house, just to start him off. The furniture was old and brown and rather heavy. When he had first looked over the house, and on the three subsequent visits he had made there prior to exchange of contracts, he had tried to imagine how the rooms might look filled with modern furniture in brushed steel, glass and polished beech. Now that he found himself in rooms that were his own, he could feel himself changing his mind. The furniture went with the wallpaper, which was a soft buff yellow with a discreet border of roses. It even seemed to go with the house. Michael had begun to think he might leave things the way they were, at least at first.

'You were aware it was a probate sale?' said the solicitor when Michael rang him. He sounded slightly irritated, as if he were wondering why he should have to explain a thing that somebody already knew. 'The Wellses live in Yorkshire. They've never even seen the place, as far as I'm aware. Anything that's there belongs to someone who is dead. Or more exactly, it belongs to you.' Michael

thanked him for his time and then put down the phone. It was already half past four. A soft light came into the living room and made the yellow walls look golden. In the front garden of the house opposite, someone had planted a small bay tree. The Summer sunshine made the dark green leaves look slightly hazy. Michael realised that in all his life he had hardly ever really been alone. He would never have guessed that being alone meant feeling quite so peaceful.

On the first day that he saw her, he thought that the blonde girl was probably waiting for someone. She was there when he came out of work at half past five, standing on the kerb by the café just across the road. He noticed her because he'd never seen her standing there before. Michael had worked in the same building for almost ten years; he noticed it when things were not the same. She was thin and she was fair. Her hair was tied behind her head in a pony tail. That made her face seem even smaller than it was. She was wearing a coat, a sort of long mackintosh of a pale fawn colour, with a wide brown belt drawn in tightly at the waist. It was too warm that evening for many people to be wearing coats. She probably gets cold, being that thin, thought Michael. He wondered what it might be like for her in wintertime.

It gave him a strange feeling when he saw the girl again a few days later. This time it was in the morning, and she was standing near the postbox to the right of Jarvis Mansions. This must be her neighbourhood, he thought, going past her and then forgetting her again. It was still an unusual experience for him, walking to work. It gave him hours in his day that he had still not had the time to find a use for. He also found it difficult to stop himself from going back and checking that he had locked the house up properly. This is me, pulling shut the door, he told himself whenever he was leaving. It would have to do. He couldn't let himself become obsessed.

The girl started being there most days, either near his road or near the office. One morning about three weeks after her first appearance, Michael opened his front door to see her standing opposite him, just across the street. She never looked at him directly, but after a while Michael couldn't get rid of the idea that it was him that she was waiting for. He never once saw her walking or talking with anyone else. In the end he started expecting her to be there. On the rare days when she was not, he felt something that came close to being regret.

She reminded him slightly of Eleanor. Seeing the girl there, day after day, allowed him to think about Eleanor in a way that he had not been able to since she had left him for James Chitty. Edwin had told Michael that Eleanor and James had a child together now, a little boy called Jasper.

'You need to put all that behind you, mate,' Edwin had said. Michael had thought that he must have been drunker than he had looked; he and Edwin didn't usually talk about personal things. 'She's a bloody weird bird. Sort of bossy, you know. I don't know how old Shitface puts up with it. Bloody cute kid, though.' Michael had tried to change the subject before Edwin could say anything else. It

had not been difficult. It had unsettled him, that Edwin had called Eleanor bossy. With Michael, she had always been quiet, restrained, almost dull. Michael found it hard to think about what might have happened if they had married, as they had planned to. It seemed an awfully long time ago.

The other girl was small and blonde, like Eleanor, but she was also beautiful. There was a frailty about her, a sort of perfectly proportioned smallness to her face and to her features and her limbs that made Michael think of a wax doll he had seen once in a museum he had visited while still at school. The doll had been French, with long, smooth, honey-coloured hair and a dress of dark brown silk. 'Porcelain doll, 18th century,' the card behind its head had said. It had been in a display case that dealt with aspects of the French Revolution. The girl did not look like the doll, exactly, but there was something about her that reminded Michael of it, all the same. He thought it might be her skin, the way it didn't seem to have a single blemish.

'Does Kim Smith have a girlfriend?' he said to Edwin one day as they were leaving the office. The girl was standing right across the street from them, half way between the bus stop and the cappuccino bar. She had on a sepia coloured skirt that came down almost to the pavement. It was decorated with dozens of tiny yellow flowers. It came to Michael quite suddenly that the skirt was somehow like the clothes he had found in his attic on the day he had moved in. He had pushed the tea chest back into the space beneath the eaves. He had not known what else to do about it.

'He's engaged, you wally. To that Laura Southgate who works in some antiques place near Camden Market. You know, she was at the Christmas party. The fat bird. Coming for a drink?'

They crossed the street at a slant, making for the Margaret Arms, but when they reached the other side the girl was already gone. Later, when he had been up to the bar to get a second round of drinks, Edwin said: 'What's this with Kim Smith, anyway? You don't fancy that Laura, do you?'

'I don't think I actually met her,' Michael said, and took a careful sip of beer. 'I just saw someone that I thought I knew, that's all.'

She started to follow him home. Michael knew how ridiculous this would sound if he tried to tell anyone about it. He did not even think of doing so. She was just one in a crowd of people on the street, but Michael came to believe that he could identify the sound of her footsteps on the paving stones behind him. He found it hard to explain to himself exactly why he thought this, because the combined noise of people moving through each other and the traffic was too great to permit such a thing. Her feet are so small they wouldn't make a big sound anyway, he thought.

Sometimes, most times, she would be gone by the time he turned the corner into Muybridge Place. He never watched for her to go, he simply sensed that she had gone. But more than once she would still be there behind him, watching, as

he grabbed the key fob from his pocket and jammed the jagged, silver piece of metal hard into the front door. He could hear the sound his breathing made as he did this. He never thought clearly about speaking to her, of just walking up and telling her to go away. When at last he did speak to her, it seemed almost like an accident.

'Oh, sorry,' he said, without even looking up. He had come out of his house and onto the pavement with his head down and his hands in his pockets. He was feeling to make sure he had brought his door key with him. He walked straight into someone who had come out suddenly in front of him from in between two parked cars.

'Michael,' she said. The sound of her voice was nothing at all like the sound of Eleanor's. It was high and bright and uncommonly clear, like the voices of girls in films he had seen about the First World War. It would make anybody think of summertime, of wide-brimmed hats with ribbons round the crown.

It seemed obvious to him that she would know his name by then. She would have heard his name called on the street. He looked up at her, quite quickly, as if trying to pretend that he was really trying to catch a glimpse of something else. She was wearing a rust-coloured sleeveless dress, with a cream wool cardigan tied loosely round her shoulders. She could put it on, if it suddenly turned colder, Michael thought. Her arms lay close against the length of her body, and were crossed at the wrists, like the wings of a lunar moth at rest. He stood before her in the empty road. 'I was miles away,' he said, and looked down at his feet.

'You'll be late,' she said, and smiled. 'It's almost nine o'clock.'

She walked ahead of him out of Muybridge Place and into Jarvis Mansions. Michael heard the sound of a car, and saw a lime green Citroen trying to turn itself around in front of one of the tall terraces at the far end of the road. He had seen it there before but had no idea to whom it belonged. It was the kind of thing that Edwin would have found out in no time, had he lived there. Edwin was just that sort of person. The girl slowed her pace, so that he was forced to catch up with her. 'Do you know Rappaport?' she said.

At work that day, Michael found it hard to concentrate. With him, that happened rarely, if at all. He believed that she would be there in the street at five, the way she'd said. The thing he found it harder to believe was that she would talk to him again. For some reason he could not help thinking that it would be like all those other evenings, when she had been there on the other side of the road but acting like a stranger. When he went out at lunchtime with Edwin and Dave Lindhurst he looked out along the street, both ways. He realised he didn't even know her name.

Rappaport turned out to be Eduard Rappaport, a French-Canadian film director Michael had never heard of. The girl's name was Olivia Newbourne. The name tasted soft and sweet in his mouth. Michael thought it suited her exactly.

They went to the Plaza, on Rougement Street. The film, *Belle Epoque*, was about a forty year old journalist called Sylvianne Bientour who falls in love with

an American college boy just before the start of the Vietnam War. Sylvianne Bientour was half Vietnamese. When they came out of the cinema, Olivia was crying. Only a little, but Michael could see that her eyes were wet. When Eleanor had cried, the fair skin of her nose and cheeks had always turned pink and there had been puffiness around her eyes. The only sign of Olivia's tears was a silvery brightness on the surface of her eyes, and a single shining line that ran across her cheek and into the fine curve of her chin.

'He didn't have to kill her,' she said softly as they went out onto the street. It was not yet completely dark. People moved ahead of them into a sky made purple by the streetlights.

'Didn't you know how it was going to end?' said Michael. 'You sounded as if you knew about the film already.'

'I've seen it three times, four now,' she said. 'I love all his films. But this one most of all. It's just that every time I see it, I keep hoping that the ending might have changed.'

When Michael went to films it was usually with Edwin. Edwin liked a lot of Tarrantino and Sam Peckinpah and Scorsese. Edwin wouldn't go and see a film unless it had plenty of guns in it. Michael hadn't really known that films like *Belle Epoque* existed. He looked at Olivia, walking close beside him in the street, and wondered what might happen if he took hold of her hand.

'Shall we go for a coffee?' he said. 'Or would you like something to eat?'

'I just thought you looked like someone I could like,' she said. They had gone into the first Italian restaurant they had come across. Olivia was eating spaghetti. She twisted it around the prongs of her fork in the way you were meant to do, but that always seemed impossible when you actually tried it. She put it into her mouth without spilling any of the sauce onto the tablecloth, without the sauce even seeming to stain her lips. 'I couldn't stop thinking about you. I know that sounds strange when it's said out loud, but it was almost as if I already knew you.' She put down her fork and rested her hand on the table. It was close enough for Michael to see the network of very blue veins under an almost white skin. 'The first time I saw you, you were with a whole group of other people. They were all shouting and laughing, but you were quiet. You had your head down. The big man closest to you hit you over the head with his briefcase, but you didn't even seem to notice.'

That sounded like Edwin. Michael thought he even remembered the incident. It had been a couple of days after he had moved into the house. Edwin had insisted that everybody went out to celebrate, and Michael had gone along with it, but all he had really wanted was to get back to the house. It had still been so new and so beloved that he could hardly bear to stay away from it. The thing was, he had not much liked the idea of having all those people in the house itself, people smoking, drinking, and making a noise, so they had gone to the Margaret Arms instead. He hadn't been able to get away until almost closing time. He certainly

had not noticed Olivia on that day.

She knew about films. She knew about a lot of things. She asked him all sorts of questions, seemingly taking it for granted that he would have some sort of answer to them. When they left the restaurant, she went with him as far as the corner of the street leading to the tube and then stopped.

'I have to go this way,' she said, pointing back the way they had just come. 'See you tomorrow.' She stood up on tiptoe and kissed him on the mouth, so lightly that he later wondered if her lips had even touched on his at all. He put his arms out, at last trying to see just what holding her might feel like, but she had already stepped back from him and moved off down the road. At first, his eyes easily kept up with her fair head as it flashed in and out between the other people in her path, but after a while even that faded and disappeared. He gave up and turned towards the underground. He went home, for once not thinking just about the house.

He liked being seen with her. He would not previously have thought himself capable of such a vanity, but he found that was the way it was.

'Why is it that blokes like you always seem to have the luck of the devil?' Edwin said. 'I know that's a fucking cliché, but it's true.'

She was usually outside the office, waiting for him after work. People couldn't help but see that she was there. Not that she took any notice of anyone apart from Michael. Edwin Fletcher was so good looking that women automatically moved in his direction. Later they might be turned away by his drinking, his bad language, and his air of sullen boredom, but it was always Edwin that they looked at first. Olivia looked at Edwin the way Michael imagined a queen looking at a servant: as if he didn't count for anything at all.

'When they melt they're hot, these ice princesses,' Edwin said to him one morning. He glanced at Michael sideways, hoping, perhaps, for information. Michael turned away from him, saying he had to go down the corridor to see Sidebottom. There was nothing he wanted to tell Edwin about Olivia. He picked up a sheaf of papers and went out of the door. He thought about how Olivia's skin looked blue against the darkness. Blue, because it was so white. White, like snowdrops, or like snow.

She lived in a single room in a dirty old house she had shown him, set back just a little from the Pentonville Road. He had a telephone number for that room, but when he called it, it just rang and rang. Whenever she phoned him at work, it always sounded as if she were calling from a telephone box. He could always hear the roar of traffic in the background. The sound was louder than anything you would be able to hear from inside a room, even a room on the Pentonville Road. He supposed she disliked the place she lived in, and wanted to be out of it. She studied Ancient History. 'I'm often out,' she said. 'I'm always going to museums.'

It made him feel uneasy, that he couldn't ever reach her when he wanted to.

It made him feel that what they had was only half way to being real.

'Have you ever thought about getting a mobile?' he asked her, trying hard to make a joke of what he felt.

'They're dangerous,' she said. 'I always know when you've been trying to call me, Michael.' She had always rung him shortly after he had put down the phone from trying to contact her. Sometimes it took less than five minutes for that to happen, but it had never been much more than half an hour. When he asked her how she did that, she just laughed. 'When you're close to someone, you just know,' she said.

He should have been happy. He thought that his happiness was marred by the expectation that she would disappear as suddenly as she had arrived. It was something he could never talk about, for fear that talk might make it happen sooner.

He began to have dreams about Olivia that were really more like nightmares. In one of them he was in the house, facing the attic window and looking down into the street below. The surface of the road seemed much further down than it could really be. He knew that Olivia was somewhere in the room behind him, crouched low under the eaves with her head laid sideways on her folded knees. He knew that she was looking straight at him. He knew that he should not turn round. He kept on staring out of the window until he felt sure that there was no attic room behind him now at all, but only Olivia.

In another dream, there were large, wet paving slabs that went right up to the edge of a metal grille set into the ground, a metal grille that looked a little like a storm drain. He looked down into it, but there was no water down there. Instead there was something long and white, a long, white endless something that flowed on and on beneath the grille like the soft round body of a great white worm or snake. It did not look quite solid. Michael somehow knew that the thing was going to come up out of the cracks between the paving stones, but he did not think he was particularly frightened of that happening. He was frightened of something else.

He woke up suddenly, before he had time to remember exactly what that was. Beside him in the bed, Olivia was already wide awake. A soft light came through the curtains from the streetlamp in the road outside. As always when he saw it in the dark, Olivia's white skin looked slightly blue.

'You were dreaming,' she said. 'I could see your eyelids moving.' She was turned towards him on her side, her form so slight it hardly seemed to part the bedclothes. Whenever they made love, her fingers dug into the flesh of his shoulders and arms with a strength that seemed to come from someone else entirely. Her fingers sometimes left marks on him, like the marks of thick steel wires. He was afraid to hold her as hard as she held him. Lifting her was just like picking up a child.

'Why are you awake?' he said. Her eyes caught some of the light from the window and shone it back at him, like little mirrors. He felt that if he focussed on

them properly he would see himself reflected there in miniature.

'I don't sleep much at night. I don't seem to need it. I like seeing you asleep. It makes me feel so peaceful.'

He wondered, as he had wondered often in the past few weeks, whether he should ask her to move in with him. She seemed to like the house. The house suited her, the way her pale brown skirts and blouses suited her. It would be better for her than the room in the house on the Pentonville Road. He ended up by saying nothing. For some reason, he could never quite make up his mind.

He did not notice the girl in the lobby because he was wondering what to do about Olivia. He walked straight into her on his way to the lift. She was coming the other way, with a foot-high pile of coloured folders in her arms. When he walked into her, the folders slipped out of her arms and scattered themselves on the ground between them.

'I'm really sorry,' Michael said. He bent down and gathered the folders together. As he handed them back to her, he realised that she looked familiar. He had worked in the building so long that everybody looked familiar.

'I was in a world of my own,' she said. 'I think your name's Michael.'

'If you know that, you've probably been here for as long as I have,' Michael said. He wondered if he should laugh when he said this, even though it didn't sound particularly funny.

'About six months,' she said. 'I work on Casa Loca, up on five. My name's Linsey Pidgeon.'

Her hair was a dark, rich brown with flashes of red in it. Casa Loca was a backpackers' travel magazine.

'Did you fancy a coffee?' she said. 'I'm meant to be going through these files.'

'I'm already late,' said Michael.

They went into the cappuccino bar across the street. 'I've already got a girlfriend,' said Michael.

'Oh,' said the dark-haired girl. Her hands were big and freckled, like the hands of someone who worked outside in the sun. 'Do you like trail walking?' She looked down into the bottom of her nearly empty cup, studying the frothy dregs as if she thought they might be hiding something.

'There's something on at work,' he said. 'A meeting I should really go to. You don't mind that, do you?'

'I'll see you tomorrow, then,' she said. The sun caught in her hair and took it to itself, turning it to gold. He watched her walking away along the street towards the tube. He went back inside the foyer, thinking that the Summer was now past its best, the sun was sinking earlier each day.

'The wine's disgusting,' Linsey said. 'But Milton Farris is amazing. You'll be glad you came.'

Milton Farris talked about his expedition to the mountains of New Guinea, showed some slides, and signed a hundred copies of his brand new book. Afterwards, some of the people who had been there went across to the Margaret Arms and crowded around the few last tables that were free.

'You have no idea how obsessed with beer you can get when there's none about,' said Milton Farris. Someone laughed. The conversation lost itself in noise. Michael thought about the mountains of New Guinea, existing somewhere almost a day away from him. It seemed incredible that you could really go and climb them, if you wanted to. Suddenly it seemed like something that he should try and make time for.

'I'm going to go home in a minute,' Linsey said. 'Do you want to come?'

He dreamed that he was turning over stones in the back garden of his parents' house. There were many stones, up by the tall back fence in an overgrown and shady corner, large chunks of granite, the leftovers from a rockery his father had constructed twenty years ago. Michael turned them over one by one, a cold grey dampness working its way under his fingernails and into his heart. The soil beneath the stones was deep brown, almost black, far darker than the dusty earth they stood in.

The last stone was over in the corner. He reached towards it with relief, sensing that his work was almost done. When he tried to raise it, it would not come. It seemed stuck fast, as if small strong hands had hold of it from somewhere underneath. He tugged harder, wanting all the time to run away. Suddenly the stone came loose, and he could see at once that there was something underneath it, something white. It was a tiny girl-child, no bigger than a toad. It lay curled on its side, quite naked, seemingly asleep. As the light from outside struck it, the creature came awake. It unfolded its tiny limbs and began to run about, skittering over the ground in the muddy hollow that the stone had made, trying to hide its face, as if the sunlight did it harm.

Michael stretched out his hand towards it and immediately the thing hauled itself onto his fingers and ran up his sleeve like a spider. Michael cried out then, and began to beat his clothes with his open palms, but it was nowhere on his body. He jerked awake, as if somebody had called him. The checked blanket that he used as a bedspread had fallen from the bed. There was nobody beside him. He felt glad to be alone.

'Why don't you move in with me, Mike?' said Linsey.

He had always been Michael to everyone he knew, even at school. The new name made a strange and happy sound against his ears, like a kind of jaunty music that he had never had the chance to know or play. She made love with him as if she listened to such music all the time, as if he were some exciting being she had just discovered. She had an ex-council maisonette in Bethnal Green. Everyone said it was a terrible area. Inside, she had made the flat grey and green

and blue, like one of the photographs in Casa Loca. She sang in the shower. She never ate meat.

'What do you see in me?' he had asked her once. The skin of his arms and around his mouth had still seemed to smell mostly of her. It was almost impossible for him to believe, at such times, that she was not really some other part of him, a part he had lost knowledge of, but now had found again. He had never before felt that degree of comfort in the company of another; he could not believe that she could feel the same.

'I've just been out with far too many wankers, I suppose,' she had said, and laughed. But then she had kissed him, not laughing at all. 'I don't want to mess around any more. I'm tired of it. I know you're different, Mike. You're not like other people. I knew that the first time I ever saw you.'

'Because I nearly knocked you down?'

'I wanted you to walk into me, idiot,' she had said, and laughed again. 'I'd noticed you ages before that. I like to watch people. I'm a journalist.'

'What about the house?' he asked her now.

'Bugger the house,' she said. 'Or better still, just sell it. It's a monster, anyway, that place. It reminds me of my Auntie Judy's house. It gives me the creeps.'

After a little while she spoke again. 'You'll have to tell her sometime,' she said. 'I mean, she's got to know. It can't go on like this. It's just not fair.'

He typed out the letter on his office computer. He folded the paper into three, and put it into a long brown envelope, one of the envelopes he used for sending out people's accounts. The paper looked very white to him. He had found that, in the end, there was not all that much he had to say.

He could see her through the glass as he came down into the lobby. He had used the stairs; the stairwell was nearly always empty, unless the lift was broken. She stood with her back to him, watching the street. As he came through the doors she turned around to face him.

'I don't need that,' she said. She reached out and took the envelope away from him. It disappeared inside her coat. It was September. She had started wearing the soft beige mackintosh again as soon as the new month had started, even though the sun was still quite warm. 'Are you going to marry her?'

'I don't know,' said Michael. 'Yes, perhaps. I think so.'

She was standing very still. Her face was very pale, but her face was always very pale. There was something in her stillness that made Michael think he had done something quite terrible, something that should not be allowed. Where will she go, he thought, what will she do. He was suddenly convinced that she was utterly alone. He touched her arm, expecting, perhaps, to find it trembling. The sheer material that made her coat made a dry rustling under his fingers. All of her was still.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I'm not used to things like this.'

He found that he was crying. Not noisily, but steadily, the tears coming down his face without a single sign from him. He leaned forward, resting his face upon the top of her head to hide his eyes. Her hair smelled hot, like straw, and faintly yellow. 'I'm no good for you,' he said, not knowing if she could hear him through her hair and through his tears. 'I know I only make you unhappy.'

'This didn't have to happen,' said Olivia. He could feel the tiny weight of her hand on his back, stroking back and forth across his upper body. It was a week since he had touched her, touched her properly. The thought that he would not touch her again filled him up with a feeling that was so strong he could not truly understand its nature. It was relief, but it was something more than that as well, something rather bigger.

'I'll see you,' she said, and moved away. She went off down the street and did not look back. Michael saw her going towards the tube. The fawn-coloured raincoat flapped slightly in a breeze he had not noticed. Then someone moved across his field of view, and she was gone.

Linsey's parents lived in Bedfordshire, somewhere just south of Harlington on the outskirts of a village that Michael had never heard of before.

'They've got this thing about going off to live in Suffolk, or the West Country, or the Malvern Hills,' she said. 'But somehow they can never quite bear to move out of shouting distance from London. It's the same as the trouble that some people find in leaving home, I suppose. It makes them nervous.' They wanted to meet Michael.

'They're going to find me pretty dull, after all your other friends,' he said. 'I don't expect they ever thought you'd end up with an accountant.'

'I haven't taken a man home since Richard Stokes,' she said. 'I nearly married him. That was five years ago. Anyway, you're not an accountant. You're an historian.'

'Not yet,' he said.

'But you will be.' She took one hand off the wheel and briefly touched his knee. The Volkswagen slew a little to one side on the shiny black road, seemingly in sympathy with its driver's every movement. Linsey liked to drive the car as if it were a weapon of war. She had shown Michael the large, four wheel drive Japanese vehicle she really wanted.

'When we move to Suffolk,' she had said, making them both laugh. He thought about the University prospectuses, packed into their suitcase in the boot of the Polo. There was an excitement in him that he kept trying not to dwell upon. He felt all the time a little as he had done the one time he had climbed the steps to the highest diving board at the local swimming baths. He had gone as far as the end of the board, but he had not been able to dive off it. He had only been twelve years old then. His mother had told him she had almost died. The house will pay, he thought. The house will pay for everything.

It had started to drizzle just after they left London, and by the time they

reached the motorway junction north of Redbourn, the grey-white wetness had become a proper fall of rain. The wipers went back and forth across the windscreen, gradually hypnotizing Michael into a state bordering on drowsiness. Linsey had put on a CD. An American woman sung a song about taking a golden highway back to her one true lover. As little as a month ago, Michael would have offered to take a turn driving. Now he knew that Linsey loved the road, that driving was no hardship for her, even in bad weather. He settled lower in his seat, barely feeling the seatbelt holding him in place. He listened to the song and wondered where Linsey had found it. He had never heard one like it before. It seemed to go on for a long time, longer than most songs had a right to. The singing woman played a guitar, very slowly. Her voice was husky and slightly slurred, like the voice of someone who had been drinking. Linsey hummed along with the main tune, as if she had already heard it many times before. Michael thought she sounded happy, in spite of the rain.

It was very nearly dark. Michael's eyes fell shut and then flickered open again, the ceaseless movement of the windscreens wipers and the silver coins of rain that rolled between them keeping a small part of himself anchored to the car. The sound of the rain falling on the roof was heavy now, and more insistent.

'Where are we?' he said.

'Just past Luton,' Linsey said. 'We're almost at the turn-off.'

She had switched the headlights on. Water danced in the beams like snowflakes made of gold. The rain seemed to coalesce around itself, taking on substance, a night-dark rain-queen, taking substance from the very night itself. It was a Friday and there should have been more cars, but somehow there were not, or they had gone. The rain fell on the road and bounced into the air again, making circles of itself, a never-ending, seamless movement. He supposed that he was dreaming.

When the car stopped suddenly, the seatbelt caught his breath. His eyes snapped open, doubtless proving that he was awake.

'There's a tree down,' Linsey said, beside him. 'What a bastard. We'll both get soaked.'

The rainfall made it very hard to see. The road ahead of them appeared to be steaming in the light from the car, but there was something else there, blocking it, something long and thick and very white. The water from the sky curled around the thing and under it, looking as if it had spawned something big and solid.

'We'll have to move it,' Linsey said. 'I don't think there's another way around.' Before Michael could say anything, she had opened the driver's side door and gone out into the rain. As she moved towards the thing in the road, Michael saw her hair flatten and blacken against her forehead and her cheeks. It looked like a detached piece of the night sky. The thing in the road seemed almost luminous, shining with a light, a white light, that had nothing to do with the car. He looked down at his right hand, which was reaching out for the door-handle on his side. Then he heard Linsey start to scream.

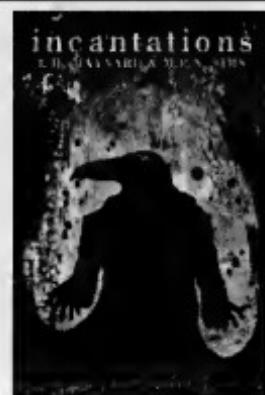


She made a high, bright noise that sounded nothing like herself. It was a sound like he imagined a great horse might make, tangled in barbed wire. Like a rabbit he had heard once, chased down by a barking dog, in a time and place that he had made himself forget. He seemed to be wandering ankle deep in rain. He stretched out his arms, the sleeves of his jacket becoming one with his skin as the falling water sealed them both together. The thing in the road stretched itself towards him, moving like a river that had lost its bed and banks. As it reared itself above him, he could see that it was marked with ridges. The ridges moved away somewhere inside, pink-tinged, muscular, the moving segments of a throat or of a great white mouth. He could not see what had happened to Linsey. The darkness had become too white to see anything at all.

There was a rectangle of sunlight on the floor, the window's elongated shape made solid by the sanded, painted boards. The girl moved slowly into it, as if going hesitantly through an open door. Outside the sun poured itself slowly down the quiet street, overflowing into the gardens and the windows of the other houses there. It was November, and the sun was cold.

She undressed slowly, the yellow sunlight catching in her mouse-pale hair. The clothes went into the box, folding in against themselves like the honey-coloured echoes of a distant Summer. She didn't have to kill him, she thought, wondering why it was that the endings of stories always stayed the same. The coat went in last, covering everything in a shifting fabric like a desert's auburn sands. His name came soundless from her pale pink lips, flashing high against the arches of her mind, bringing back a spatter of the rain into her tired, pigeon-coloured eyes. She blinked away the wetness, her eyelids moving like a camera-shutter trying hard to capture one last vital image. She pushed the fallen strands of yellow from her face, looking at the ochre sunlight on the wooden floor.

It was dark under the eaves, but warmer than the space inside the room. She sat there sideways, her knees beneath her chin. Closing her eyes, she thought about the things love meant. Love meant waiting, sometimes not for long, sometimes halfway to forever. In the end though, if you loved them hard enough, the person that you loved always came back.



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Servant Of Glass

Wayne Stamford

John Emery adjusted his glasses and squinted at his companion against the low winter sun. He had not been incumbent of this parish long, and thought himself lucky to have struck up an instant friendship with the local squire, but... 'Did you bring me out here to see a scattering of broken glass at the bottom of a hole, Patrick?'

Patrick just tugged his moustache and grinned.

'I give up.' He held the edge of his clerical robes out of the mud and peered into the excavation. 'Are you going to tell me, or am I going to have to suffer that knowing grin throughout dinner?'

'One more chance to work it out for yourself.' Patrick leaned out onto the ladder leading into the hole. 'Come along.'

'If I must.' John waited for him to reach the bottom, then gave the post to which the top of the ladder was tied an experimental thump. It seemed firm enough. With a sigh, he set about climbing down after him.

'This is all very well for you. I did not come dressed for grubbing about.' And, as he stepped off the ladder and surveyed his clothing, he saw that he had picked up a disgusting amount of mud on the way down.

'You should get some air into your lungs. Come out tomorrow and help me dig up the window, if you want. I will send my carriage for you.'

John was about to remind him that tomorrow was a Sunday and he had one or two other demands on his time, but—'Window, you say?'

Patrick bent and retrieved a dirty piece of glass — probably the most morose shade of red that John had ever seen. 'This is the old rose window from your church. Or I think it is. I will know for sure when I have the pieces out of the ground. If you don't want it, though, I dare say I can have the estate chapel done over to fit it in.'

John frowned at the shard. The rose window in his church was a well-preserved example from perhaps the late sixteenth century. If Patrick thought that he had found the remains of the one which preceded it, that would be a find indeed. He looked around for somewhere to stand without further damaging the glass under his feet. But the churned clay and shadows defeated his effort.

'Be interesting to see what it portrays, won't it?'

'Yes.' John shook his sleeves down to cover his wrists. Nothing seemed to dispel the chill creeping over his skin. 'They tend to all be of the same things. But there are not many as old.' He had decided not to debate the provenance for now. The less time spent in this hole the better. 'Assuming it survived the wrecking of so many churches about that time, it might have been in place for a hundred or so years before its removal.'

Patrick grinned. 'Actually, the story goes that the priest at that time had a fit and smashed it on the day it was installed.'

John rubbed his brow. The need to get out of the hole was bearing down on him. He glanced at the piece in Patrick's hand and a shudder shook him.

'Well, never mind for now.' Patrick gestured for John to precede him up the ladder. 'We will have to hurry if we mean to warm ourselves before dinner.'

When he reached the top, John walked away a couple of steps and stared across the park at the avenue of starkly outlined lime trees. He had almost turned while on the ladder to urge Patrick to hurry. But he had been struck by a sudden fear of what he might see in the bottom of the hole, watching him.

John sat at his desk, sipping brandy. The book-lined walls of his study were proof enough against anything irrational his mind could conjure.

He shook his head and drank some more. A quick perusal had confirmed his suspicion that the parish records for the period when the window was installed were more fragmentary than he might have hoped. The rapid swings to and away from Catholicism had produced a series of excisions and amendments. Nonetheless, he read on.

His attention was sharpened by the passages following the stubs of half a dozen roughly torn leaves. He sat forward and reread the first paragraph following the missing pages.

'On this twentieth day of June 1564 I took the living of this parish in fearful fashion. It seems to me that the disagreement between my good friend and predecessor, Thomas Howard, and the craftsman, Piet ver Ryeleh, has come to a sorry end. Thomas is now held under restraint for his own well being in the hospital attached to St Hugh's of Hammersmith. Master Ver Ryeleh is not to be found anywhere and the window which he was constructing as an act of good will is missing from its place. I fear that, in his poor state of mind, Thomas may be responsible for both absences.'

John sat back and massaged his eyelids. Clearly, the real story of what happened was in the missing pages. All he had here was supposition by someone who came after. He rubbed his eyes, again. He should go to bed. But the thought of leaving the safe light and warmth of the study increased the tension which he realised had been building within him. He read on.

'When I supped with Thomas two nights before the catastrophe he seemed as sane as any man. He was pleased with the evident settling of his quarrel with Master ver Ryeleh. Yet he admitted to some impatience with the man. Even in this hour of reconciliation, ver Ryeleh refused all requests to view the window before its completion. I could see that he was mightily vexed on the matter, though he also wished to keep the peace.'

'Having just returned from many months spent in the Netherlands, I knew little of the events leading to the affair. After much persuasion, which almost

ended the evening on a note of discord, he agreed to tell me the whole story. Given the subsequent question of poor Thomas's state of mind, I give no assurances as to its truth.'

John peered at the hearth. Despite the fire being banked high, cold pinched the flesh between his shoulder blades. He rose and dragged his high-backed armchair away from the desk and closer to the flames. He sat, bent his will to ignoring the chill, and read on.

'According to Thomas, Master Ver Ryeleh had settled himself in a neighbouring town and advertised himself in the way that seems as much part of the master craftsman's art as is the execution of his trade. He told me that, although the man himself was physically repellent, the work was of an exceptionally high quality, using some techniques which had not otherwise reached England from his home country. He looked at me for some comment, but I was unable to give any. I was unaware of any particular expertise in stained glass in the Netherlands. Nor, to be truthful, did I think that Master Ver Ryeleh's name was Dutch. I strongly suspected that it was something the man had taken to calling himself to enhance his reputation. It was certainly true that many highly skilled crafts men are coming to our shores from various parts of Europe. It would do a tradesman no harm to be mistaken for such a one. At any rate, it please Thomas to employ the man.'

'His opinion of Master Ver Ryeleh declined soon after, though. With each completed commission in the area came tales of movements within the churches at night. Some said that the man employed assistants who completed the fine detail on the windows by moonlight alone. Many said that there were damp footprints and a smell of pondweed, or even of the sea, around where the work was being done. Thomas admitted to me that he had wondered if the construction of the windows was a ruse to allow access to the church for some improper use. At that time he was notable for avoiding making accusations which could lead to a resumption of the persecution of minor deviations from church teachings. Nonetheless, when the same thoughts were raised by others, he chose to act.'

'Being well respected throughout the diocese, his suspicions had a great influence on the willingness of others to employ Master ver Ryeleh. By Thomas's reckoning, he cut the man's trade to almost nothing within days. There were a few who chose to ignore his concerns, but too few to keep a master craftsman in work. It was no surprise to Thomas when Ver Ryeleh turned to the Bishop himself. He had the testimony of those who still employed him that no wrongdoing had occurred while he worked on their windows. Some said that they had kept a special watch on the work, but nothing untoward had happened. The man simply chose to carry out part of his work at night. There was some talk of why this would be so, but to little end. Thomas had to admit that his actions were based on rumour. He still did not feel well disposed to the

man, but the unexpected offer of the new window disarmed him. He accepted and, despite the man's secrecy about the work going on at night, nothing untoward came to light.

'A mere three days later, I arrived in the parish to find the window destroyed and poor Thomas in a state which I can only call violent mindlessness. Also, three boys of the town have been found in a sorry state. What happened to them no one knows. But they are white-haired, despite their youth, and have not spoken a word since they were found.'

John closed the book with a slap and swallowed in a tight throat. He had turned to it seeking confirmation of his suspicions of religious intolerance. Good sense said that this story was a blind for some such activity. But he had no more wish to look on the reconstructed window than he had to peer back into the hole in which it had lain. And nor, for his own sake, should Patrick.

John hurried into the stable yard. The new butler said that he would find Patrick there. He had seen the servant before, but never wondered why Patrick employed such an ugly man. He looked more like a toad than anyone John had ever seen.

He entered the carriage house, blinking until his eyes adjusted to the gloom. 'Patrick?'

His friend strode out of a room on his right. As he drew closer, John saw the lines of strain on his face. Nonetheless, he was smiling warmly. 'This is early for you to be up here, isn't it? Don't you have a congregation to attend to?'

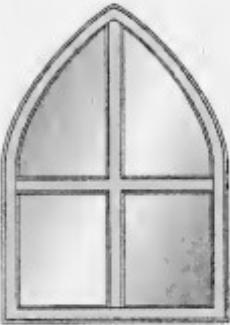
'This won't wait.' But, as John said it, he lost confidence in his words. Did he really mean for Patrick to abandon the recovery of a sixteenth century window? He should be applauding, not giving in to unformed horrors. 'I wondered if you were still going to put that window into your chapel. I do not think that you should, you see.'

Patrick crossed his arms. 'Think I'll go mad, do you?'

'Do not joke about it, Patrick.' He almost winced when he heard himself saying, 'There are more things in heaven and on the earth than either of us have seen.'

'I am not jesting. It took all night, but the panels have been reassembled. I know the stories but, I swear, I have seen the window and I am as sane as you are.' John looked into his eyes. Tired, but not mad. Unless with triumph.

'Come and see for yourself.' Patrick turned and strode into the room from which he had emerged. John hesitated, then followed. He fought against the urge to squint to protect himself from whatever he might catch sight of. In the far corner stood a pair of trestle tables pushed together. On them, he saw the dark blots of stained glass already leaded together. Patrick shifted one closer to the others, then turned around. For a moment, it seemed that something else — something unearthly was looking out of his eyes. Then he blinked and smiled.

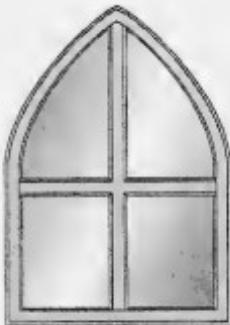


'Come along, John. Can't have you taking so long over this that you are late for church, can we?'

John stepped closer. He let out a small sigh, mingled relief and disappointment. This was not a rose window – not that shape. This could not be the one. But the panes were so dark that they defeated his attempt to recognise the subject. He bent closer, casting a glance at Patrick as he leaned forward too. He had the momentary foreboding that his friend would leap on him and force him even closer. But

Patrick just smiled. John returned his attention to the glass. There was nothing inherently wrong in the darkness of the work, he reminded himself. It was made to be seen with the light coming through it, not while laid flat in a dim stable.

He touched the panel in front of him – still wet from cleaning, he supposed. As he peered at it, the blocks of colour and partly-gone paint resolved into something organic. His eyes widened. A mass of tentacles on a squat, cylindrical body. He felt himself lean closer without meaning to, but could not pull away. A whispering voice within his head seemed to speak gibberish.

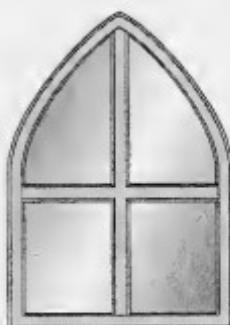


He turned away convulsively as a clatter outside broke the fascination. He stumbled towards the doorway. Patrick's boots scraped on the floor behind him, and he had to fight not to run from him.

'John?' Patrick caught him by the shoulders and spun him around. His face loomed large in front of John's. But it was his own – creased with concern. 'What is it, John?'

He shook his head, throat refusing to co-operate. Then he found his voice. 'That thing. The tentacles.' He shuddered. As the image reasserted itself in his mind, he could not shrug off the impression that he had seen the tentacles move – wriggle obscenely, beckoningly.

'What are you talking about? I thought the time of you church types being slaves to superstition was long past.' He let go and strode to the tables. 'Look, it's a tree. Why that should be a subject for a church window I don't know. But that is clearly what it is. Trunk and branches. Nothing more.' He pushed his hand through his hair. 'I only took on this, when it was suggested to me, because I thought that it would please you as well.' He looked crestfallen.



'I am sorry. Perhaps it was just the way that the paint had been rubbed away in places that led me astray.' John frowned. 'Who was it that suggested you look for it, if you don't mind my asking?'

'Not at all. It was Riley, actually.'

John's stomach knotted. 'Rye—?'

'Riley. My new butler?' He shrugged. 'Apparently, stained glass was his family's profession, years back. The story of this window was known to him because of it. He had two of his cousins come over to help with the construction last night. Both as ugly as he is.' He shuddered. 'I will be glad to leave them alone here tonight.'

'Tonight?'

'They are coming back to do the repainting.'

'At night?'

Patrick shrugged again. 'I suppose they have regular work to attend to during the day. The feverish way that they go at it, I might well wake up tomorrow to find the window already fitted in the chapel.' He frowned. 'I'm sure that there must have been some other relative of Riley's working there last night. There was a neat hole in one of the walls though the gamekeepers say they heard nothing in the night, and it is only a hop from the pheasant nursery.'

He shook his head. 'A bit raw, not even asking first. But you can't really complain, with all the free work they're doing. Do you want to see?'

'Uh, another time.' John backed away. 'I must not be late for the morning service.'

'Of course.' Patrick watched him. 'You are welcome to come for dinner tonight, John. If there is anything you want to say, it might come easier over a full stomach and a few brandies.'

He blinked, opened his mouth, then closed it. It would mean going home in the dark. 'Tomorrow, perhaps.'

Their farewells were stilted. John felt as if he had already lost his friend. And for reasons which the sensible part of his mind could not even dignify.

Outside, he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. He pushed up his glasses, then halted with his hand in front of his face. He sniffed his fingers. Where they had touched the wet glass they smelled as if they had been wetted from a freshly dredged pond.

John sat close to the fire in his study. He had tried to immerse himself in further reading of the parish records. They were certainly uneventful enough now to drive the most anxious man to sleep. But the events of that morning nagged at his mind. He wondered if he had just judged the window by what he expected to see. Patrick's explanation was just as reasonable. He couldn't believe that he had been so troubled by what he read that he had acted so precipitately. On the other hand, he knew that he was not prone to fancies. All the dire coincidences compounded themselves into a convincing case. Except for the fact that both Patrick and himself had looked upon the disassembled window and kept their wits.

He shook his head and bent his attention back to a very mundane account

by another predecessor – two or three times removed from the events of the broken window. It raised a yawn within minutes. Then he jerked to alertness and reread a passage.

'Last night I attended Matthew Granger, a resident of this parish, on what I fully expect to be his death bed. I cannot say that he is a member of my flock, for he has not attended church at all during my tenure here. I knew of him through tales which were often repeated in my presence. These said that he suffered from a fear of the church which dated from a period when several members of the parish, including the minister of that time, fell to madness. Though he is completely bald now, I am told that he was marked from that time by a sudden whitening of his hair. Also, he lost the power of speech for a time, although the duration varies according to the teller of the tale.'

'Despite my surprise, and misgivings, I went to Granger's cottage as soon as I received his request. It was known to me that he refused to speak of what had happened all those years ago as vehemently as he refused to enter the church. I must admit that the speed of my response was in no little part in the hope of receiving his deathbed confidences on the matter. And I was not to be disappointed.'

'His state when I reached his bedside was no better nor worse than that of most poor townsfolk of his age who I have attended. He seemed animated by a great need to speak, though. Much of what he said made no sense to me, and I was much distracted by the fearful working of his features as he spoke. The elements of his story I have condensed here.'

'Grainger was little more than a child at the time. A window was being constructed in the church under an unusual degree of secrecy. It was only a matter of time before some boy would decide that there was something to see out of mischief. Two nights before the window was to be unveiled Grainger and two of his fellows decided to see for themselves.'

'The boys crouched outside, beneath the shrouded window, listening for a sign that the mysterious workmen were present, until they became too bored or nervous to wait any longer. At first, when they pulled the covers back, there was nothing to see. There was only a smear of moonlight that night. But, as they peered up at the nearly completed window, a glow seemed to grow on the other side of the glass.'

'Slowly, they were able to make out an amorphous shape, growing in definition as the illumination increased. Grainger heard one of his companions cry out as the colours gelled into a hideous figure. He could only mutter to me something about a mass of arms.'

'Then he felt a sudden cold close on him, and he no longer stood outside the church. He was squatting on a stone floor, surrounded by slowly rocking bodies, before the fleshly creature which the window had only parodied. It sat on a high throne, completely unmoving. He knew that the pressure against his

skin was that of a great depth of water. Fear of what he would see stopped him looking down at the body he inhabited, which was able to breathe despite lack of air.

'Then he felt a presence in his mind and knew that it came from the horror in front of him. There was no humanity in the touch; only a sense of vastness, of depths and knowledge beyond what any man is able to comprehend. It probed him until he felt his wits would snap. Then the attention shifted away. The vacuum left by its passing filled with a bolt of terror which overwhelmed his senses.'

'When he again became aware of himself, he was bound to a bed and unable to speak of the horror still lodging within him. Slowly, the power of speech returned and the fear lessened. But he could never go near the church, even though the window had been destroyed long before he was well enough to be allowed out.'

So, this confirmed that Patrick had been wrong about it being the rose window in the first place. The boys would never have been able to reach it from the ground if it had been. At least this laid to rest the possibility of there being more than one of the monstrosities. He read on until he found the old man's name again.

'Matthew Grainger died early this morning. It pains me that I was unable to relieve him of the illusions of horror which dogged him to his grave. No doubt the Lord is merciful to men so afflicted in their wits and he will now be at rest.'

John leaned back in his chair and stared at the book-clad wall in front of him. There was no doubt that it was the same window that he had seen that morning. But, it had no more effect on him than might be accounted for by nerves and a trick of the light. Why? The answer might be the key to saving Patrick from a terrible fate. He glanced at the curtains, etched with the moonlit shadows. But it could not be that. There had not been enough light from the moon for the boys to see the image. Nor was the answer simply that they had looked on it at night. The priest who had gone mad had only seen it in full light of day. He stared at the moonlit patterns on the curtain again, and his gut tightened.

The priest and the boys had seen the window illuminated from the other side: by sunlight and by that anonymous glow when the boys looked upon it. He muttered thanks that he had seen the window lying flat on a table, not yet set in place in the chapel. But, if Patrick was right, he would get up tomorrow morning to find the thing in place.

John was already standing and turning to the door when the horror of walking up to the Hall in the dark stopped him. Would Patrick take any notice of his warnings? Had he already seen too much of the image, even though it was not illuminated? There was no point in appealing to him. It must be done without his knowledge.

At dawn, he decided, he would go to the chapel and destroy the window. And this time there would be nothing to recover.

John approached the chapel through the woods, the bag on his shoulder swinging against his side. Despite being able to make his way unobserved, the darkness under the trees gnawed at his nerves. The heavy Autumn dew seemed viscous and unhealthy. He wiped the moisture and trapped spiders' webs from his boots as soon as he emerged from the cover of the trees.

He watched the chapel, but nothing moved in its shadows. The slanting rays of the sun turned the new stone supporting the window glaring white; the glass reflected the light in harsh coronas. He waited still, darting glances left and right at each churr of foraging birds. Still, nothing untoward showed itself.

He drew the hammer from his bag and weighed it in his hand. The noise would likely attract someone's attention before he had knocked out the whole thing and scraped the shards into his bag. He decided to concentrate on the head: scatter the shards of that as widely as possible. Jogging towards the chapel, he cast another look over his shoulder. There would be no second chance.

He stood beneath the window. With his arm at full stretch, and with the extra reach of the hammer, he thought that he would be just able to strike the panels comprising the head. He had not thought that he would have to knock the glass inwards. He would have to enter the chapel to collect up the pieces. But, as long as he was careful not to look at the window, he doubted that it would be an obstacle to his goal.

'You are too late, John.'

He spun around. Patrick stood at the corner, one hand resting on the wall, the sun behind him. John's throat closed when he saw the squat form of the butler come around and stand next to his master. He glanced at the woods. There was no one to see, but the shadows under the trees seemed to flow a little way further than they should. Dark forms moved within them.

'John?' Patrick's voice snapped his attention back to him. It had the weight of great knowledge behind it. But at what cost? 'The stories you have heard are wrong.'

'No. I have seen too much to doubt it.' He shook his head. 'It might not be too late to save you, though.' He raised the hammer.

'No!' Patrick's cry was in his old voice. John paused. 'You are wrong. It was not looking upon the window which drove the old priest mad. It was that he was the one who smashed it. He could have joined the Great One's worshippers. But he destroyed the window, and that was his undoing.'

John's arm dropped as he shook his head again. 'How could the destroying of this work of wickedness have been the cause of his woes? He acted righteously.' He waved the hammer at the butler. 'You believe this creature's lies without question? How could you know truly what happened to him?'

'Because I have been in the Great One's presence. In mind or spirit, whatever, I travelled there. I have seen the creature that the priest became when his act cast his mind from his body for these past centuries. I cannot let that happen to you, friend.'

He walked slowly towards John, holding out his hand. John looked down at the hammer, then up at the window. What to do? Ice seemed to trickle into his belly at the thought of Patrick's explanation: to be trapped with that thing forever.

He returned his gaze to Patrick's face. He saw his eyes clearly for the first time within the shadows cast by the early morning sun. The consciousness staring out of them could not be human. But the face worked constantly around them. Fear, pain, other fleeting emotions which defied classification. Whatever had taken him over had not entirely snuffed out his friend. He was suffering, trapped. No better off than the old priest, even if his explanation was true.

John raised the hammer and struck. The heavy head lodged in Patrick's right eye socket. The other eye swivelled, as if trying to see what had blinded its partner, then fixed on John. He tugged the hammer free and struck again and again, erasing the cold speculation in its gaze. Patrick tumbled sideways, briefly grasping at the chapel's wall. But John kept on hitting him, driving his friend's body beyond any usefulness to the thing possessing it.

Thick fingers plucked the handle out of his hand. John turned; flinched from the butler's face so close to his own. Then he laughed.

'You have lost.' He pointed at his friend: dying or already dead. 'He is free of you and your blasted scheme. Do you hear me?'

The butler batted him across the chest. He spun back against the wall and slid to the ground next to Patrick's silent body. But he paid no attention to the butler stood over him. From beneath the trees the tide of blackness rushed across the grass.

'You have done nothing to stop us,' wheezed the butler. 'This man's body was no more use to our master than another.'

As he spoke, slimy bodies pressed close around John. He fought with his fists. But it was like hitting wet rubber. Warty, blunt-clawed hands lifted him bodily from the ground.

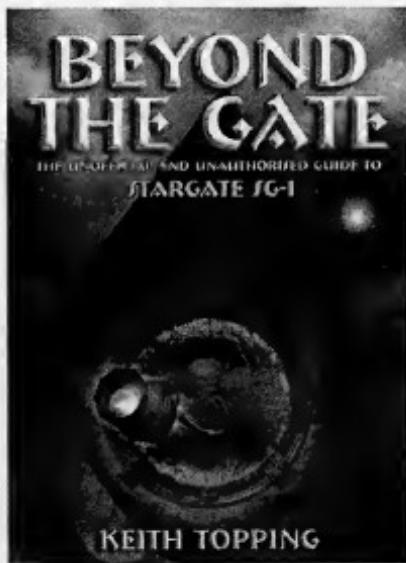
He heard the butler continue, 'Your body will serve equally well,' as they bore him towards the door of the chapel.



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You know that "we come in peace" business? Bite me.'

The Sooterkin

Chris Naylor

A while ago, I founded a somewhat obscure small press magazine called *Satan's Claw*. You may have come across it, if you're into weird stories of black magic, evil hauntings and all that stuff, though it never sold more than a hundred or so copies.

The guy who helped me publish it was Doug Trafford, a friend from way back. We were at college together, and he was my best man when I married Sally. Doug had girl-friends too, but none of his relationships lasted very long. I got the feeling he was a hard man to please when it came to women – as if he was measuring them against some personal standard, and none of them quite made it.

Sally and I were married straight out of college, me with my useless second-class degree in Philosophy and Politics, her with a first in Art and Design. She was snapped up by an advertising firm and started earning big money straight away. I was snapped up by the dole queue. While Sally was out at work, I stayed in our flat, cleaning and cooking, and sometimes summoning up the energy to bash out a story – at first on a second-hand typewriter, and later on a word processor Sally bought me one Christmas. I wasn't really going anywhere, but then I already had most of what I wanted: I had Sally, and the freedom to mess about at what I liked doing. Plenty of people strive their whole lives and never achieve happiness. I seemed to have just dropped into it.

A year later I was also looking after our baby son, Martin. Sally took the minimum time off work for the pregnancy. She was doing well. Her firm was one of the biggest, and she was achieving rapid promotion. I used to look at her salary cheques and wonder how anyone's work could be worth that much.

I carried on writing, and not getting published. We moved to a house in a more expensive suburb. And Doug, who'd been in America taking a course in business management, reappeared in London.

'I've decided to become a publisher,' he told us that first evening, his feet up on the sofa, a glass of whisky in his fist. 'That means I'll be in London a lot from now on. It also means I'll be around here begging drinks or a meal from you at least once a week.' He grinned expansively. Sally, sitting on the carpet playing with Martin, looked up at Doug and smiled.

'How's the writing these days?' Doug asked me. 'Getting anything into print?'

I smiled sheepishly. 'Hardly anything. My stuff isn't very commercial.'

Doug shook his head. 'That's no good. No use producing stuff that doesn't sell. Sally understands that, don't you, Sal?'

My wife smiled her secretive smile, and carried on tickling baby Martin's bare feet. Martin chuckled and gurgled with pleasure.

I said, 'I can't get the hang of the business side of writing. In fact I can't think of writing as a business at all. It's not that I don't understand how business works: it's just that I can't seem to connect it with what I do when I'm sitting at the keyboard.'

Doug studied me for a moment. Then he snapped his fingers. 'You know what you should do? Start your own magazine. That way you can get your stuff into print and learn about business at the same time.'

That was how *Satan's Claw* was born. I could have scotched the idea if I'd wanted – it sounded like hard work, for one thing – but I was curious to see what would happen.

Satan's Claw, as I've said, never got much of a readership, and after a while Doug turned his attention to more lucrative clients. I soldiered on by myself, producing occasional issues to an irregular timetable. It certainly wasn't lucrative, in fact it didn't even cover its costs, but it kept me out of mischief. I got so interested in it that I practically stopped writing stuff of my own. With hindsight, maybe I spent too many evenings answering letters and editing stories when I should have been paying more attention to my wife. And I probably should have wondered why Doug's visits grew more frequent and longer, and what he and Sally found to do together, after Martin had gone to bed and I had retired to my study to work...

But I was never the most observant of husbands, and it came as a hell of a shock to me when, on the day of Martin's seventh birthday, Sally told me that she was leaving me for Doug.

'I had no idea,' I said, feeling numb with shock.

'I'm not surprised,' she said, looking at me with a mixture of sadness and exasperation which, I now realised, had been her usual expression around me for some time. 'You hardly seem to notice whether I'm here or not. All you think about is that ridiculous magazine.'

'I could change,' I said.

She shook her head. 'No, you couldn't. And anyway, it's too late for that.'

The next morning, she moved out, and took Martin with her. They went to stay in Doug's flat in Islington, and I was left alone in the big, echoing Hampstead house that Sally's money had paid for, and which I had assiduously kept clean and tidy while she was out at work.

Weeks passed. She returned the desperate letters I wrote her, unopened. When I rang, the answerphone was always switched on, and she never returned my calls. I went round three times, and was met twice by a locked door, and the third time by a smiling but immovable Doug, who told me to push off, as I was no longer part of Sally and Martin's lives.

The Hampstead house went up for sale, and I was forced to move to a cramped bedsit in Stoke Newington. It felt as though my entire world had caved in.

And I began to feel hatred for Doug Trafford, who had taken away my two

main reasons for living. In fact I contemplated suicide several times, but there was something I badly wanted even more than oblivion. Revenge! Not against Sally, and certainly not against Martin, but against Doug, the affable, smiling snake-in-the-grass. My best and oldest friend! I sat in my grim little room in Stoke Newington and thought of a hundred ways of murdering Doug Trafford, and all of them seemed much too good for him.

Then a solution to my problem arrived out of the blue, in the shape of a man called Aubrey Mortensen.

I continued to edit *Satan's Claw*, even after Sally walked out. Not because I wanted to – I was too depressed to care – but because I felt I owed it to the subscribers and contributors.

The next issue went out as usual, by post to the regular subscribers. A week later, I started getting letters. Any magazine gets readers' letters, and it was a policy of *Satan's Claw* to invite praise and criticism, and publish a selection of both in the next issue. I was prepared for the usual dozen or so, containing a mixture of approval and disapproval of the stories I had seen fit to include. I wasn't prepared, though, for fifty letters, all questioning my sanity, and asking me what on earth I was doing publishing drivel like the story by Aubrey Mortensen. The bulk of the complainers were my silent majority – people who had been on the subscription list for ages, but who never put pen to paper except to send me an annual cheque. Now they were all crawling out of the woodwork, and they all hated Aubrey Mortensen's story. Who the hell, several of them demanded, was this Aubrey Mortensen character anyway?

A good question. I dragged out my files from under the bed – storage space in my new home was limited, to say the least – and dug out Mortensen's story and submission letter. They were both handwritten, which was odd for a start, because I invariably rejected anything that wasn't typed.

I read the letter, which was brief and formal. Then I read the story.

It was truly awful.

When I'd finished it, I sat back on my bed and asked myself what I'd been thinking about, to include such a morass of turgid prose in my magazine. Had I been drunk? Had I had a brainstorm? Aubrey Mortensen's story wasn't just the worst thing I'd ever published, it was the worst story I'd ever read. It was as riveting as the telephone directory and as original as recycled manure.

The really scary thing was that I could remember reading it when it first arrived, and thinking that it was utterly brilliant.

Had I gone mad?

There was a London phone number at the top of Mortensen's letter. I picked up the phone and dialled it.

A soft, rather dull voice at the other end said, 'Aubrey Mortensen here.'

'Ah, hello,' I said, and mentioned my name. 'I'm the editor of —'

'I know who you are,' came the answer. 'I've been waiting for you to ring. I

expect you'd like to talk to me about that story I sent you.'

'That's right.'

'You're in Stoke Newington, aren't you?' said Mortensen. 'I'll come straight over.'

'It's a spell, of course. I expect you realised that.'

I stared at my visitor. Aubrey Mortensen was a thin, dry stick of a man, perhaps fifty, perhaps older, shabbily dressed, wearing old-fashioned half-moon glasses over which he peered at me short-sightedly. He had arrived carrying an ancient battered duffel bag, which now sat on the floor beside the armchair he was occupying — the only armchair I now possessed. He looked about him with the air of a professor of archaeology surveying a not particularly interesting tomb.

'Not much of a place,' he commented. 'I get the feeling things haven't been going too well for you recently. Am I right? If so, perhaps I might be able to help.'

I cleared my throat. 'Er, about this story—'

'I told you, it's a spell. Quite a clever one. It took me several attempts to get it right.' He looked at me mildly, watery eyes swimming above the half-moon specs like the eyes of a baleful fish. 'Are you interested in real magic? Or are you, like so many people these days, simply looking for a cheap thrill? That is what your magazine aims to provide, isn't it — a *frisson* for the jaded hoi polloi?'

'That's a bit strong—'

'Is it? Your writers talk a lot about black magic, but I wonder how many of them have really encountered it. None, I suspect. The thing about magic, the only important thing, is that it *works*.'

'Oh, really?' I said feebly.

'Really. Take that story I sent you. Dreadful, isn't it?'

'It certainly is,' I said with feeling.

'So why did you publish it?'

'Well...' It was embarrassing to have to admit it. 'When I read it the first time, I thought it was brilliant. I don't know why. I see now that it's terrible, but that first reading...' I scratched my head.

Aubrey Mortensen leaned forward and fixed me with his baleful eyes. 'Embedded in the words of that story is a spell. A spell to make the first person who reads it believe that he has encountered a masterpiece. It only works for the first reader, and it wears off after a few days.'

'That's absurd!'

'Not to someone who understands magic. I am a very poor writer, I'm the first to admit it. But then, I have no interest in being a writer. My interest is in magic. I invented a spell, and I wanted to try it out, and you happened to be the person I tried it on. And it worked. You were, quite literally, *enchanted* by my story. And so you published it.'

Mortensen leaned back, a self-satisfied smirk on his bespectacled face. I

stared at him. Could I take this man seriously? I opened my mouth to protest, but could think of nothing intelligent to say.

'Magic is my hobby,' Mortensen said, his placid eyes never leaving my face. 'More than that – it's my vocation. I have private means, so I don't need to work. I have no interest in money. I don't want fame – quite the reverse, it would be a nuisance to be too well-known – nor do I want any of the other absurd, childish things that most people waste their lives trying to obtain – usually unsuccessfully, I've noticed. I live for magic. I will work any spell I find interesting enough, provided it involves no personal danger to me. Is there anything I could do to make your life more bearable?'

His voice was soft, insinuating, persuasive. I can imagine the Devil having such a voice, though the Devil would surely look more impressive than this seven-stone dried-up specimen with the absurd glasses. He looked so inoffensive, and not in the least alarming. I wasn't sure whether to take Mortensen seriously, but at any rate I wasn't afraid of him. Perhaps I should have been.

'No, I don't think so.'

'No? Think hard. What is the one thing in your life that you desire most? What is the thing you lack that would make you happy?'

I'd been keeping it at bay until that moment. The thought of Sally and young Martin was just a dull, insistent ache at the back of my mind. Mortensen's words dragged it brutally into full consciousness.

I sank my head into my hands and moaned aloud.

After a few moments of self-pity, I got control of myself and raised my head. Aubrey Mortensen was sitting with his duffel bag on his knee, in the act of drawing open the strings. His eyes met mine, and he smiled a pale, watery-eyed smile.

'Have you got a large saucepan?' he asked.

I blinked. 'A saucepan?'

His smile widened a little, showing a set of snaggleteeth. He inserted his right hand into his duffel, and drew out a small opaque bag, the kind sandwiches are wrapped in. It was tied at the neck with a piece of string, and bulged with something soft.

'Put some water on the gas,' he murmured, 'and while we're waiting for it to boil, tell me how I can help you.'

In the tiny kitchen of my bedsit, as a pan of water bubbled on a gas stove which looked as if it had come out of the Ark, Mortensen ceremoniously untied the string, and emptied the contents of the plastic bag into the water. There was a hissing and spluttering, and a rather unpleasant smell.

'It looks like soot,' I said, peering into the pan.

'It is, mostly.'

I stared at him. *Soot?* In my saucepan?

Well, it was too late to object now. I didn't even say anything when he

selected a large wooden spoon from the kitchen drawer and gave the filthy mixture a stir.

'Quiet now, please,' he said. 'There are some words that go with this.'

I stood there, feeling like a student in a rather arcane cookery class, while he intoned a lot of what sounded like bad Latin. The sooty water fizzed and spat and stank, but nothing much else seemed to happen.

'What exactly—?' I began.

He waved me to be silent.

A moment later, something incredible started to happen.

From out of the black boiling water in the bottom of the pan, something emerged. It had a head of sorts, and arms and legs, though they were all crude and almost shapeless. It crawled about in the pan, as if blindly searching for something.

Then it opened its eyes. They were scarlet – no pupils, just hollows filled with red fire. It stared up at us, and opened a ragged red slit of a mouth in a howl. It was a horrible noise – somewhere between a baby's cry of rage at the moment of birth, and a kitten's mew of terror at being plunged into water.

Then it tried to climb out of the pan. Aubrey Mortensen hit it with the wooden spoon. It let out another horrible cry, and tried again.

Mortensen hit it again, harder. All the time, he was droning on in Latin.

The thing in the pan began to dissolve. It melted before our eyes, sinking back into the black broth. Its crude arms flailed helplessly, and then sank down and became black slime. The head was the last to go. The red mouth vanished from view like a swimmer's. The red eyes flickered once like tiny Satanic candles, and then winked out. Finally even the top of the head was gone, and all that remained was a stinking black liquid, thick and viscous.

Mortensen turned the gas off, and the sound of the gas-jet and the bubbling of the liquid died away.

I found that I was holding my breath, and let it out with a shaky sigh.

'What was that?'

Mortensen smiled crookedly. 'A sooterkin. Witches used to conjure them up and claim that they had given birth to them through sitting too long over a stove. I summoned it, and trapped it in the soot mixture. Now the sooterkin's malevolent spirit is fixed in the liquid, and the liquid is ready to be used.'

I peered into the pan at the dubious black scum in its bottom. 'Used for what?'

Aubrey Mortensen picked up the pan and gently swirled it around. 'You're a writer, aren't you? What does this look like?'

'Ink, I suppose.'

'Ink, yes.' He grinned, showing even more of his irregular teeth. 'But ink, as I shall explain, with some very unusual properties.'

At first Mortensen was going to put the ink in an old fountain pen of mine, but then I had a much better idea. In a bid to save money on ink-jet cartridges, I'd

recently bought one of those refill kits which include a syringe. Mortensen filled the syringe with his ink, and then I injected it into the cartridge, and substituted the cartridge for the one currently in the word processor's printer.

'It doesn't matter what you write with it,' Mortensen told me, as he watched me complete this operation – very gingerly, because I was afraid of the vile stuff, and didn't want to get it on my hands, or even my clothing. I kept half-expecting the horrible little sootykin to re-emerge unbidden from the liquid. I was going to throw the pan away, too, when I got the chance. 'A story, a letter – even an invoice. Anything will have the same property. The first person who reads it from beginning to end will die. You and I are immune – I made sure of that.'

He didn't stay long, after that. His parting words to me at the door, as he stared into my face with those fishy eyes, were, 'Remember – no man achieves his deepest desires except through the destruction of other people.'

Then he went. I haven't seen him since.

I felt guilty, I suppose, even before I'd done the deed. I could have written, as Mortensen suggested, an ordinary letter or something equally innocent. Somehow that didn't seem fair. Instead, I decided to write something that would let Doug understand the danger he was in. So I wrote a first draft of this story, the story of his treachery, and of my planned revenge. I put it in an envelope, addressed it to 'Doug Trafford, extremely private and confidential,' and took it to the postbox.

Two days later, the postman delivered a note from Doug.

Quite liked your funny little story, though I wish you'd had the decency to leave Sally and Martin out of it. Also it could do with a proper ending – you don't say exactly how I'm going to die. What's supposed to happen to me? Finish me off properly – don't leave your readers up in the air!

Mortensen was right. No-one treats magic seriously, not even when it's aimed squarely at them.

Doug had sent my story back with the note. I tossed the manuscript into the corner of the room, and waited.

That afternoon, dozing over the keyboard, I was woken by the phone ringing. Even before I picked it up, my neck was prickling with gooseflesh, as if part of me knew something uncanny was happening at the other end of the line.

It was Doug. His voice was hoarse, strained. Very different from the breezy, affable Doug who never let anything get to him.

'Thank God it's you! For pity's sake, can't you stop this thing?'

The panic in his voice was music to my ears. So Mortensen's ludicrous spell had worked! I felt like gloating, but I wanted to make sure, so I played it cool. 'You sound rather on edge, Doug. Is anything wrong?'

He almost screamed down the phone. 'Don't play games with me! It wants to kill me, I know it does! Call it off, *please!*'

I sat silent for a moment. I could hear him panting on the other end of the line, the desperate laboured breathing of a man who has been running to escape something and has finally realised that no amount of running is going to save him.

I said, 'Where are you, Doug?'

He gulped twice before answering, deep gulps of air into tortured lungs. 'A phone booth in the West End – don't know exactly where. I'd been having lunch with a young lady at her flat, and I was walking back to the tube station when I heard something behind me, and looked round.' His voice shook, and almost failed. 'What is it? No-one else seems to be able to see it – and it can *walk through walls!* There's nowhere I can hide...' His voice sank to a blubbering whimper. I waited, saying nothing. So Doug had been having an illicit lunch with 'a young lady'. He couldn't even be faithful to the woman whose affections he'd stolen. Poor Sally. I felt nothing but contempt for Doug Trafford.

Eventually, he spoke again. His voice was a little more controlled now, though there was still panic underneath. 'Look, I'm sorry, really sorry about Sally and Martin. I'm sure we can work something out – but please, first, call it off! Please!'

'I can't do that, Doug,' I said.

Next moment he almost deafened me with a scream of pure terror. 'It's *here!* Please – *please!* Ah, no!'

He screamed again. The scream was cut off suddenly. Then all I could hear was a rhythmic clunking that grew gradually slower – the sound of the handset, swinging at the end of its wire, knocking against the side of the phone-box.

I hung up, and went into the kitchen to make myself a pot of tea.

At six o'clock that evening, the phone rang again.

I came back into the living room and picked it up, wondering who it could be. Not Doug, obviously. My heart jumped – perhaps it was Sally! Sally, wanting me back!

'Sally?' I said eagerly.

'Ah, good, it's you,' said the soft voice of Aubrey Mortensen. 'I was worried in case... Tell me, did you use that spell?'

'Certainly I did,' I said. 'I wrote a story using your ink. It worked, too. Why?'

'Oh dear.' He sounded embarrassed. 'The thing is, I'm afraid I made a slight error. I've realised that the spell won't work quite as I told you.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, you remember I said it would affect only the first person who read the story?'

'Yes.'

'I'm afraid I was wrong. For some reason – I must have been dreaming, I can't think how I came to make such a silly mistake – I forgot to limit the scope of the spell. It will actually affect *everyone* who reads the story. Not just the first person – *everyone*.'

I was barely listening, because an important thought had occurred to me. I glanced at my watch. It was four hours since Doug Trafford's phone call.

Probably Sally would have been informed by now. She would either still be upset – though not too upset, I fervently hoped – or she would already be thinking ahead to life after Doug. Either way, it was the right time for me to contact her. In fact she might be trying to ring me. I had to get this fool Mortensen off the line.

'That's very interesting, Mr Mortensen, but I'm afraid I'm expecting a call.'

'Don't hang up.' His voice had lost its dull quietness. He sounded agitated. 'I want you to promise me you won't let anyone else read that story. If several people were to read it and suffer the consequences, then the police would start asking questions, and—'

I broke in on his ramblings. 'You don't need to worry. I've got the story here. Only one person has read it.'

'And you didn't take any copies?'

I hardly heard him. A nasty thought had just struck me. What if Doug *had* let someone else read it before sending it back to me?

Sally, for instance?

My mouth went dry. I started to tremble.

Mortensen was still rabbiting down the phone. 'Did you take any *copies* of the story?'

'Er... Copies?' I swallowed. 'But you said the spell was in the ink. Surely a copy wouldn't be affected.'

'No, you fool!' His voice rose, becoming shrill. 'You've misunderstood! The magic doesn't *stay* in the ink. Once the story has been written, the spell is embedded in the *words themselves*. Any version of the story – any copy made of it, whether by hand or by machine – will have the same effect. Even partly rewriting the story won't destroy the spell. The only way to destroy it is to—'

I put the phone down. I couldn't listen to any more of his drivel. I was becoming desperately worried about Sally. Suppose Doug had let her read the story?

Then Sally would die the same way Doug had.

My hands were shaking so violently I could hardly hold the phone, but eventually I managed to dial the number of Doug's flat. I went through an age of torment before the dialling tone was interrupted.

'Hello?'

'Sally! Thank God! Are you all right?'

'Fine, thank you.' There was a coldness in her voice that long ago hadn't been there. It hurt me to hear it, but at the moment I had more pressing concerns.

'Sally, did Doug show you that story of mine?'

'Doug?' She ignored the rest of the sentence, latching onto his name as if it were a magic charm. 'Is Doug with you? He was supposed to be getting home early, but he isn't here. I was just about to phone his office.'

So she hadn't heard yet. Surely the police must have found the body by now. But perhaps what was left of him wasn't easy to identify.

'No, he isn't with me. Sally, about the story. Did you read it?'

'Yes, I did.' Her voice grew even more icy. 'I didn't like it. Why did you have to write about me and Doug? Martin was really upset when he read it.'

Seven-year-old Martin had read it? Oh God...

'Is Martin there with you?'

'Yes, he's here. Why?'

'Sally, stay where you are. Keep Martin with you. Lock all the doors and windows, and don't let anyone in. I'm coming right over.'

She was protesting and making bewildered noises when I put the phone down.

It wasn't much use telling her not to let anyone in. Doug had said the thing could walk through walls. But I had to say something. I had to have some hope, however irrational.

I don't remember how I got to Islington. Tube, or taxi, or bus – I can't recall. I only remember scrambling up the stairs to Doug's flat, breathing so raggedly I was nearly passing out.

I knocked frantically. There was no reply. I tried the door, but it wouldn't open – she'd obviously taken my warning seriously, and dropped the latch. I hammered on the door, and shouted through the letterbox. 'Sally – let me in!'

Silence.

I smashed the glass, opened the door from inside, and ran into the hallway.

'Sally? Martin? Where are you?'

Nobody. Had she and Martin gone out?

I went into a bathroom, pleasantly furnished in pale blue. A second door led into a kitchen/diner, this time in pastel greens. It was all very tasteful and refined.

The third door opened onto the sitting-room. This was quite different – vivid, almost gaudy. The room was decorated in irregular splashes of red. I don't dislike red, but something about these grotesque scarlet splashes turned my stomach. Why had Doug chosen those horrible furniture covers, which looked so damp and sodden, as if the red dye was still wet, and those white rugs with scarlet flowers, which gave the odd illusion, as one looked at them, that the crimson petals were slowly spreading outwards?

I stared at those huge red flowers, and began to tremble violently.

'No, oh no...'

Then I heard a sound – a faint, muffled whimpering, with something vaguely familiar about it.

I swung round. 'Martin? Is that you? Where are you?'

A shadow in the corner of the room moved. I turned to look at it.

The sooterkin stood there.

It had grown. It was as tall as a man, and much broader. It regarded me blankly, crimson eyes empty and expressionless in the squat, shapeless head. Then it raised a clumsy fist, and I saw that it grasped something that squirmed and whimpered. Something pink and bloody, and about the size of a human

child.

The sooterkin opened its mouth, and pushed the squirming, whimpering thing inside.

'No!!!'

Sobbing, I hurled myself at the black, shapeless lump. It was like fighting a sack of soot. My fists sank into soft blackness, making no impression. I buried my head in the black torso, weeping, choking, suffocating.

Almost gently, the sooterkin freed itself from my flailing grasp, and deposited me on a chair. Then it moved away, sucking redness from one misshapen paw, like a bear sucking honey. It shambled to the wall and went straight through it, like smoke passing through a wire grille.

Exhausted, sagging in the chair, I closed my eyes and wept. Then I opened them again, and screamed until I was worn out with screaming.

They told me later that the police found me wandering along a London street, my clothes covered in blood. Eventually, after weeks of interviews with men and women in suits and in white coats, all of whom asked me questions in a patronising way and clearly disbelieved my answers, I was brought to this hospital. Not an ordinary hospital: the doors are made of steel, and there are bars on the windows. In nearby rooms, I hear other patients cry, and shout, and argue with themselves in loud, tormented voices.

I'm not allowed to return to my flat. The authorities believe I have murdered my family and publisher, though they are baffled as to how I disposed of the bodies. They do not intend to put me on trial, because the psychiatrists say I am mentally ill. I tell them that wickedness is not the same as illness, but they only smile tolerantly. No-one takes black magic seriously any more.

But they will. I shall make sure of that, and also that Aubrey Mortensen is made to pay for the death of my wife and son.

The doctors were pleased when I told them I wanted to write fiction again. It would be therapeutic, they said. They even arranged for my word processor to be brought here from Stoke Newington. So here I am, writing the final version of my story. I shall submit it to a magazine – which, no doubt, is where you are reading it now. The copy I send will have been printed on my own printer, using Aubrey Mortensen's ink. If Mortensen is right, and even copies contain the spell to summon the sooterkin, then everyone who reads this story will die. That will certainly make the authorities track down Aubrey Mortensen, and bring him to justice.

My apologies, dear reader, for what is going to happen to you. It is regrettable, but necessary. You do see that, don't you?

When you turn out the lights tonight, look closely at the darkest, blackest shadow in the corner of the room.

It will probably have red eyes.

Dead Dot Com

Allen Ashley

Paul's screen showed the usual default of blue skies and scudding clouds topped by cute cherubs. When he could be bothered, he would search through the settings for something more masculine or perhaps simply disable the screensaver altogether. Whatever, his mind needed a break. Or a change. And here came one.

'Hey, mate,' Steve announced, 'remember that web site I was telling you about?'

'Ah, let me think,' Paul stalled. 'Wasn't it something like "Buxom Girls In School Uniform Who'll Perform For You"?'

'Nah, stop messing. I told you that was "Access Denied". No, the one everybody's been after, the Holy Grail of Internet links. A pathway that connects the material world with the spirit world.'

'You're having me on! The whole thing's completely apocryphal.'

'No, I'm totally genuine, mate. No leg-pulls, no wind-ups. Here's the address – why don't you try it?'

Tempting, but – 'Which tells me you haven't hooked up. Why not?'

'There's really no one I'm bothered to contact. Honestly. Anyway, mate, you can take it or leave it. Just don't shoot the messenger, eh?'

'Sure,' Paul agreed and took a well-deserved rest break. But his mind kept buzzing. Since he'd first heard the rumours it had become something of a personal obsession. He'd stayed cool in front of his colleague but inside...

Hardly refreshed, it was time for him to go back on shift. Steve turned at his approach, closed his own monitor down with that annoying burst of sunlight and blast of trumpet.

'So...?' Steve began.

'So I'm up for it but maybe not just yet. Anyway, won't the powers that be block access?'

'You'll never know until you try.'

Paul shook his head, muttered, 'I can't believe it will be that simple.'

'It won't,' Steve agreed. 'You'll probably have to organise a full body hook-up – you know, like advanced Virtual reality machines. Nothing to be scared of. There're some leads and things knocking around here somewhere. I'll have a look for you.'

'Sounds like I'm going to be the victim in some sort of Frankenstein experiment.'

'Oh, just relax, Paul. What have you got to lose? Eh?'

'That remains to be seen. Anyhow, isn't it time you knocked off for a while?'

'I'm out of your way, pal. Happy working.'

The adjective and the verb participle didn't sit easily together, Paul reflected as

he settled to his tasks. In truth, this was a pretty mediocre existence. Enlivened by the repartee with Steve but otherwise a tale of high-tech drudgery. Things would improve when his hard work was eventually recognised and he got a promotion out of here; but for now – and a seemingly endless stream of approaching and departing news – he simply had to keep his nose to the proverbial grindstone and his shoulder to the ever-spinning wheel.

Hope keeps us human. Steve's words and the devilishly simple address played on his mind and made Paul hurry to complete his present tasks and duties. His friend had been right – the necessary equipment was knocking about in the nooks and crannies and it was a matter of minutes to make the connections. He'd used them before but still felt a little uncomfortable attaching receptors to his frontal lobes. But what harm was going to come to him? Really?

More nervous than he'd felt in a long time, Paul let his fingers hit the keys like a priest with his rosary beads, punched 'Search' and sat back breathlessly. He watched the usual opaque lists of numbers litter the screen as the server sought connection. The image flashed and blanked out a few times and he feared he'd unwittingly unleashed a virus into the system. He re-focused his attention solely on the task bar. At last the word *Done* appeared in Arial script and a second or two later a simple message filled the monitor:

Welcome to Dead Dot Com. If this is your first visit please hit the 'Y' key now. If you require a language other than Standard English please choose from our list of options. Registration details will be taken shortly.

Soon he was busily tapping in the pleonastic details: full name; date and place of birth, Christian calendar preferred; current occupation – that made him smile. Finally, a request to post a thumbprint anywhere on the screen or, failing that, submit to a retinal scan. Then a wait like a mini eternity.

'If *Tomb Raider* took this long,' he mumbled, 'the world would still be in the Stone Age.'

Eventually came the awaited clearance: *Identity Confirmed. Access granted. Please type in your key words.*

This was the moment that might change his fate forever. With a shaky level of control that would have shamed a leper with St Vitus' dance, he somehow keyed in: *Mum and Dad.*

Leaned back. Crossed his fingers – as if superstition could help him now. Waited. And more. Was the system too busy, close to over-loading maybe? Was it all some con or pathetic practical joke?

His machine's attached speakers were switched off but a calm, neutral voice emerged anyway, making him jump like a scalded kitten.

'Thank you for your enquiry, Paul, which we are processing with vigour. We anticipate a result is several hours away, human subjective time. Please log off and try again later.'

Obedient at heart, he did as bade.

'Well?' said Steve.

'I logged on and got in some sort of queue or displacement message.'

'You're not going to give up as easily as that, surely?'

'I'm just very uncertain about the whole thing. I'm not convinced it's really what I want – you know, a little knowledge is dangerous and all that. Also, I'm sure the boss won't approve.'

'You can't back out now,' Steve countered. 'Anyway, thou shalt follow the Eleventh Commandment.'

'Which is?'

'Don't get caught.'

This time then. A nervous click on the mouse. Identity details keyed in. That delicious *frisson* associated with illicit and dangerous activities. Pauses that seemed to span the entire lifetimes of spiral galaxies. Next step. Next stage. Who do you wish to contact?

Mum and Dad.

Like they were one entity. One combined loss, however you looked at it.

'Go ahead, Paul, they're online.'

Sweet Jesus, where do I start?

—Mum, Dad, if this is all true then it's a blessed miracle. If it's some sort of mean-spirited wind-up then we'll know soon enough. I just want to assure you, this is really me, your loving son.

—Mother and I want to believe you, boy, but ... well, we have to ask you to prove it.

—Whatever you want, Dad.

—Who was your best friend at primary school?

—John Nevins. Gosh, whatever happened to him? Go ahead, what else do you want to check?

—Describe your school uniform, Paul.

—Black with yellow piping. I think it was a silk trim. Blazer and cap. Plain trousers. Black and maroon when I went to St Petrifa's. Satisfied?

—Just one more, son. What was the name of your favourite teddy bear when you were a toddler?

—I didn't have a teddy bear; it was a monkey. Captain Beefy.

—Oh my god, Paulie, it really is you!

—Yes, Mum. Do you want me to put you through all that rigmarole, too?

—If I just tell you that our marital home was known as number 41 Springfield Close but owing to an administrative error we were actually housed in number 43, will that suffice?

—This is just astonishing! Forget space travel and alien visitors – for the dead to be able to communicate with the living has got to be the biggest leap in history.

—We were told it only works with the recently dead. Five years at the outside.

—It's been two years, Dad, since the ... accident. I think we're safe for now.

There's so much I want to discuss, so many things I want to iron out. I'm sure you've both got questions for me. What an opportunity this is!

—We're losing you, Paul. The words are be ... intermittent. Listen ... don't panic ... will re-establish ... later ... certain.

The link dissolved. He wondered whether the liquid coursing down his cheeks was perspiration or tears. It had been a while since anything had produced much of either.

'You've got to get them online again,' Steve insisted.

'I don't know. It took so much out of me, I could hardly complete my shift. And now ... it's like some weird sort of dream, like I was off my head or something.'

'You can't get off your head here.'

'I know. It's ... just a lot to take in that I was re-united with the two people who meant the most to me in my life. Maybe I don't have the mental strength to go through it again.'

'You know that's not true, Paul. Besides, it'll prey on your mind if you pass up this opportunity. A chance to clear the air over so many outstanding issues.'

'I guess you're right. I'm worried about misusing the facilities here and getting punished but ... when I feel I can take it again I hope they'll both be available.'

'They'll be waiting, Paul, be sure of that.'

A tense inhalation, breath held like a suspected heretic hiding from the Inquisition.
Then;

—Dad? Mum? Are you there?

—We're here, Paul. We've been waiting.

—The system's been down. Sorry.

—It's hardly your fault.

—Yeah, you say that but I often feel I'm to blame for everything.

—Don't be so maudlin, Paul. We had each other and we had you. Our lives were complete.

—Even when I was in trouble at school? Even when I was up before the magistrate for nicking stuff from the corner shop?

—We've dealt with this before, son. You fell in with a bad crowd for a while. At heart, you were always decent, hard-working, respectful and respectable. Just think how proud we were when you went off to university.

—It was no big deal. At least, it shouldn't have been ... I'm sorry I drank so much, Dad, Mum.

—It's a young man's prerogative. Who's ever met a twenty-one year old teetotaller?

—And ... I don't know, I want to say two contradictory things at the same time.

—Go ahead, we're here.

—I realise I was the joy and focus of your lives and yet I also think it would

have been easier for all three of us if I hadn't been an only child.

—You know your Mother and I couldn't really have any more after you, Paul.

—Yes, I remember you telling me how much Mother suffered during the pregnancy and the birth.

—That wasn't the full story, Paul. I had a low sperm count – yeah, me, an ex-sergeant in the Marines! I still ... ashamed even now. We tried for a few years but it wasn't happening. Mary told you that story to save my pride, I suppose. She was actually radiant and beaming throughout the whole nine months she was carrying you.

—I never knew that. But couldn't you have tried IVF or something?

—The waiting list ... ridiculous. They ... donor sperm ... told them ... don't ... bring up ... created ... someone wanking into a jar!

—Dad, you're breaking up again. And we've only just started.

—... again later, Paul ... be here.

'I've been on again, Steve, but the link's unstable. I mean, I know it's a miracle hook-up an' all but ... I feel I'm going to have to rush things to say all I want to say. To confess all my sins.'

'And you're still worried about being caught in the act, I bet!'

'Yes.'

'I've been thinking about that and I've started to believe that you should stay on as long as you want to. It's part of the therapy programme. Maybe even some sort of test.'

'A test?'

'Sure. Doing what you can to right a few wrongs.'

'But I can't go back and change things!'

'I know you can't but – look, I read or heard somewhere that ninety per cent of history is perception. So by communicating and thrashing things out we can all make a difference.'

'Put a rosy glow on situations, you mean? Sounds a bit naff and simplistic to me.'

'Think what you like, I'm only trying to help,' Steve countered. 'Anyway, I've got work to be getting on with so let's leave it at that – unless you want us both to be stuck in this shit-hole forever.'

Come on, boot up, you damn infernal machine! Just this one last time, please. Come on!

At last:

'Where do you want to go today, Paul?'

You know where I want to go but that's impossible so this is the next best thing. Perhaps my last ever contact with those dear to me ... if this obsolete piece of techno-junk ever makes the connections. Honestly, how come things worked so badly when it was claimed to be state of the art? State of the *Ark*, more like!

—Mum, Dad, this whole link is getting shakier than the walls of Jericho so who knows if we'll ever talk again.

—Say what's on your mind, boy.

—I want to cut right to the chase and tell you about that night in April two years ago. It's important you hear my side of the story because – well, for obvious reasons you wouldn't have before.

—Tell us as much or as little as you want to, Paul.

—OK. I'd been knuckling down to my course work for several days, downloading stuff off the Internet, in and out of the college library, living on Yorkie bars and coffee. It was nearly Easter and I was due a break. Steve told me about this party at a house two miles away from campus – a friend of a brother of an ex-girlfriend; I don't know, it was a bit tenuous but, hey, we were young blokes and we had a crate of lager in the back. Jack was our designated driver and would stick to the limit. Darren had his eye on a Media Studies third year who was going to be there. She had a couple of interesting mates. We got there about eight-thirty and it was already packed out. Do you want me to go on?

—Of course – if you wish.

—It was a good night. There was an American girl named Carrie. She said she only smoked at parties but she must have gone through nearly a packet of Superkings! She was over here on exchange till early Summer so I'd have to work pretty fast with that one. I had her mobile number – or 'cellphone' as she called it – scrawled on the back of a five pound note! Anyway, it was nearly three in the morning when the four of us left. There were broken clouds, a few stars, no discernible moonlight. It had rained earlier but was crisp and clear now. I felt the wheels seem to lock as we suddenly left the road about a mile outside town. The trees did for three of us. I suppose in mortal terms my death was instantaneous but I felt the full agony of that bone-smashing impact like it lasted longer than the Crucifixion.

—We're so sorry, son. The newspapers said Jack was drunk.

—He wasn't. I was with him most of the night and it was lemonades and orange juice. Unless some moron spiked his drink.

—Darren's out of his wheelchair and is talking of entering the priesthood.

—He's changed his tune! Amazing how one fatal moment can so alter a life. Or end it, of course.

—It's been unbearable without you, Paul. We think about you all the time. It seems so unbelievable to be talking to you again. We miss you, son. We wish you were with us or we with you.

—Listen, Mum, Dad. I never got round to reading Dante but – how can I explain this simply and quickly? I'm a bit hazy but I've got bodily form. I believe I'm in a sort of purgatory and I've got to complete a heap of tasks before I can move on up or my soul is at rest or whatever lies ahead for me. Steve fills in the alternate shifts. We seem to be way behind schedule all the time and it's not looking good.

—Are you saying, Paul, that you won't be contacting us any more?

—I don't know. You'd think being dead I wouldn't worry about doing wrong or being punished but, hey, this is the afterlife and it's even more serious here. There's lots of stuff I wanted to ask you — about my childhood, mostly — but I may not log on again; or at least not for a while.

—We understand, Paul. It's been an unexpected joy to have this contact with you and to know that you still exist in some form. We're always here for you.

He broke the connection.

The default screensaver showed Blake's vision of God punishing Adam. Steve had brought it up during a rare idle moment and Paul had let the amendment stand. The seemingly almost omnipresent and omniscient overseers had not appeared to be bothered one way or another so long as the penitents were properly chained to mouse and keyboard. It could have been a lot worse, Paul supposed. A celestial salt mine or something.

'I think we're alone now,' Steve whispered.

'As much as we'll ever be in this existence,' Paul answered.

'I'm going to risk taking a break. You?'

'Still a bit to finish.'

And when he was finished, Paul glanced all about him — for all such a cursory inspection revealed — pursed his lips, debated, decided.

One last link-up with Dead Dot Com. If it still existed. If he dared go off-task for the time required.

—Mum? Dad? Answer me please! Be there for me!

Nothing. Maybe they'd been unable to keep their end of the connection open and viable. Maybe they'd just fallen asleep at the monitor.

—Dad! Mum! Why don't you answer?

He waited. A little more. The screen flickered but only to the Almighty in his chariot and the first man bent-backed. Paul swooshed his mouse in a circle. He was still connected but —

A bleeping noise and a swirling yin and yang shape which resolved itself into a message box. He clicked on the icon.

—Son, your messages have been a revelation to your Mother and me. Now we know for certain there is an afterlife, we've made a momentous decision. Life's been hell for the both of us these past two years. We're going to sit in the car with the radio on and a little pipe leading in through the tiniest gap in the window. It shouldn't take long until —

The screen blanked for a few open-mouthed seconds until finally it displayed the cheery message, 'Thank you for using Dead Dot Com: a unique website linking the living and the dearly departed.'

'NO! Mum, Dad, you don't understand, no!'

Later the screen showed God punishing his recidivistic creation. It never did go back to the fluffy clouds and cherubs.

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